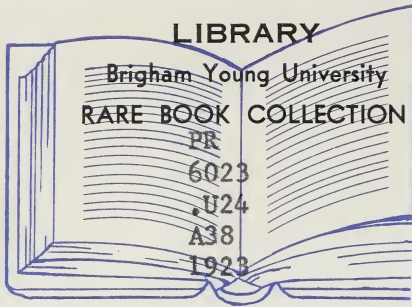


ADVISORY BEN

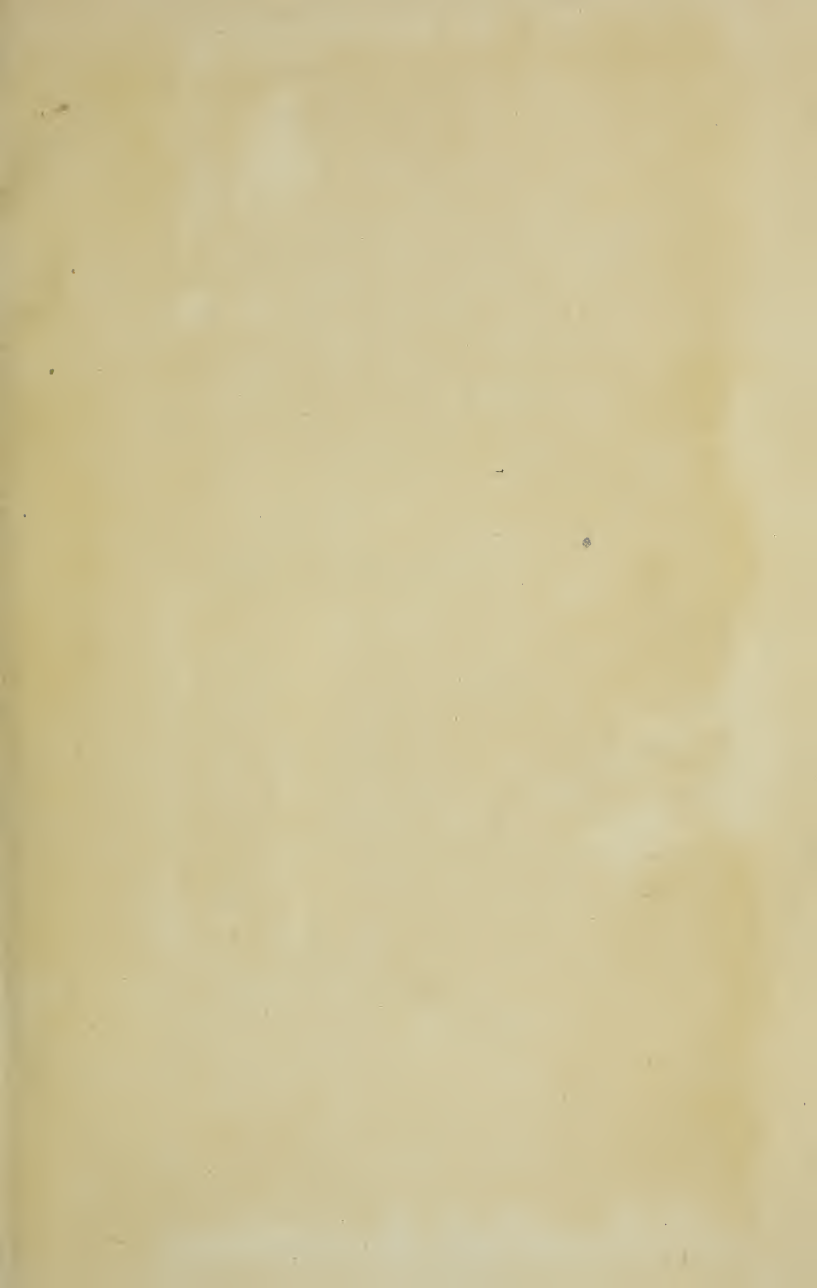
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ADVISORY BEN

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CLOUD AND SILVER
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'TWIXT EAGLE AND DOVE
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URBANITIES
SPECIALLY SELECTED
THE HAMBLEDON MEN
THE OPEN ROAD
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GOOD COMPANY
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and
THE POCKET EDITION OF THE WORKS OF
CHARLES LAMB : I. MISCELLANEOUS
PROSE ; II. ELIA ; III. CHILDREN'S
BOOKS ; IV. POEMS AND PLAYS
V. AND VI. LETTERS.

ADVISORY BEN

A STORY

BY

E. V. LUCAS

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ADVISORY BEN

I

IN the lives of all, even the least enterprising or adventurous, moments now and then arrive when a decision has to be made ; and our demeanour at such times throws a strong light upon our character. Many of us postpone action, either sheltering behind a natural reluctance to do anything emphatic, or feeling that the Fates ought to arrange our affairs for us. After all, it is their *métier*.

But my Ben was not like that. My Ben (to give her her full name, Benita Staveley) was instantly practical, and her disapproval of the pastoral process known as letting the grass grow under your feet was intense. All her actions were prompt, without, however, coming within the zone of impulse. Even at twenty-two she envisaged a situation with

perfect clearness, and knew her mind ; but why I should mention twenty-two as though it were a tender age, I can't explain, except as the result of pure want of thought. To say of a man that he is twenty-two is often merely to accuse him of callowness ; but in a woman twenty-two can be maturity in everything but actual physique ; and this is especially the case with those who, like Ben, even from young girlhood have been relied upon by father, mother, brothers and sisters to solve their difficulties and make things smooth for them.

Ever since I have known Ben—and her mother and I were playfellows half a century and more ago—she has been a mixture of factotum and oracle, yet without ever for a moment declining into a drudge or losing gaiety. A Cinderella perhaps ; but a Cinderella who went to the ball without any supernatural assistance ; a Cinderella with a laugh and a retort ; a Cinderella who won respect and as much chocolate as she wanted, both from those within the home and out of it. Not a few boxes, for instance, from my own hand.

But there had, as yet, been no glass slipper

and no Prince, unless, of course, you count poor Tommy Clinton as one: Tommy, who has been coming home every summer from his billet in Madeira for the past six years with two mastering motives to impel him—one being the wish to carry off something, either in singles or doubles, at Wimbledon, and the other to propose again to Ben—and so far has had no success in either enterprise.

Personally I am glad that she didn't marry Tommy, for he takes his defeats too sweetly, almost indeed as though he preferred them to victories. Such plastic and easy-going youths, although they may be agreeable enough during the time of courtship, and as dancing partners, or even as husbands for a little while, never grow into the sterner stuff that our Bens require, desire and deserve. But girls who have the Atlas habit run, of course, great risks of attracting the men who want to be treated as though they were the world.

Under these circumstances it is a little odd that Ben, save for the punctual, if casual, annual attack of Tommy Clinton, was unpursued; but one has to remember that

Colonel Staveley did not like young men about the house. Not that that makes any difference when passion rules, for we know how Love treats locksmiths ; but at the time this story opens Ben was heart-free. She might appear indeed to strangers to look like becoming one of those attractive girls who somehow or other seem to be insufficiently attractive ever to marry. But I never thought so. She had, however, no doubt, missed the first matrimonial train, the one that conveys to the altar carriage-loads of immature, high-spirited couples on the edge of the twenties. Other trains come along later, of course, but the service is not so good.

II

WHEN a girl has been keeping house for her father for three or four years and her father then (although sixty-three) marries again, her position is not easy, nor does it demand a blind belief in all the malignant tradition

that surrounds stepmothers to admit this. As a matter of fact, Colonel Staveley's new wife would probably have been happier if her stepdaughter had remained in the house. Indeed, I am sure of it, for she is neither a jealous woman nor a meddlesome ; and Ben's knowledge of her home and of its master's ways would have made life more simple, while the girl herself would have been a companion when that master was playing bridge at his club or informing such of his fellow-members as would still listen to him what the Government—if it had a grain of sense—would do.

For some time—we are now in the year 1921—Ben and her father had had the house to themselves, for her mother was dead. This lady, I ought to say, had displayed something like genius in the ordered way in which at definite intervals, and with discreet alternations of sex, she had put her children into the world ; first a girl and then a boy, and then a girl and then a boy, and so on—beginning with Alicia as long ago as 1883, and then Cecil in 1887, and then Merrill in 1890, and then Guy in 1894, until her youngest daughter's turn to arrive came in 1899, and

Toby's, her youngest son's, in 1902, and the tale was complete.

Of these six, when Colonel Staveley married again, only Ben was at home. Alicia had become Mrs. Bertrand Lyle and the mother of two boys and was now a widow ; Cecil, who was a soldier in India, had married a French girl and was childless ; Merrill had married a Hampshire vicar and was childless ; Guy, also a soldier in India, was engaged to Melanie Ames, a friend of Ben's ; and as for Toby, he was nominally imbibing learning at Oxford, but, like so many undergraduates of my acquaintance, seemed more often to be imbibing other things in London. I don't mean to excess, but dancing is a thirsty form of industry, and late hours have been known to lead to early restoratives.

Ever since Mrs. Staveley's death, the Colonel had counted on Ben, who was then eighteen, for everything that would promote his comfort. He knew—none better—that the first essential of a selfish man is an entourage of unselfish people. And of these Ben was the chief. It must not be thought that the Colonel was a bully ; rather, a martinet. He suffered from a too early

retirement, aggravated by his wife's meekness and complacency, and as he had not thrown himself into any amateur work, and was, by nature, indolent and conversational, he was left with far too much leisure in which to detect domestic blemishes. A pedant for routine, his eye, when it came to any kind of disorder or novelty of arrangement, was like a gun. There was one place and one only for every article in the house, beginning with the hat-stand in the hall; and his first instinct, if not thought, on entering his front door was to look for something out of position. And so onwards, through whatever rooms he passed.

When he descried a fault it was, formerly, his wife, and latterly Ben, who was court-martialled; and not the actual offender. This probably, while fortunate for that person, was even more fortunate for the Colonel, who might otherwise have been without cooks and parlourmaids most of his life, for servants often put up a better resistance to martinets than the martinets' own flesh and blood. But whereas Mrs. Staveley had been reduced too often to tears, Ben bore the assaults with a courageous or stoical humour.

"I can't conceive," the Colonel had exclaimed wrathfully, on the very day before this story begins, "why on earth people can't leave my umbrella alone."

"But it's there all right," Ben replied. "I noticed it in the stand a few minutes ago."

"Yes," he snapped, "but some idiot has rolled it up. That new girl, I suppose. I thought she looked an officious fool the moment I saw her."

"Well, father," said Ben, "if she did roll it up, it was purely through excess of zeal, that's all; and don't let us be too hard on excess of zeal in these times, when almost every one is so slack."

"But what about her being too hard on my umbrella?" the Colonel demanded. "That's what I complain of. If I leave it unrolled—which I did very carefully and on purpose—it's no business of anyone else to roll it up. And no woman can roll an umbrella, anyway. It's an art."

"All right, father," said Ben, "it shan't happen again."

"I hope not," the Colonel barked back, "and it wouldn't have happened this time

if you'd kept Atkinson. I can't think why you let her go."

"My dear father," said Ben, "I've told you again and again. She left in order to be married. Surely a girl must be allowed to marry if she wants."

"Pooh!" said the Colonel, with infinite scorn. "Marriage!"

It was on the next day that he announced his own engagement, through which Ben was driven to come to a decision as to her career.

III

WHEN Belle Lorimer, the wealthy, merry, or at any rate not lachrymose, widow of Vincent Lorimer (of Lorimer and Lorimer, the stockbrokers), agreed to the Colonel's suggestion that together they should tie a second knot, the Colonel was probably assuming that Ben's capable control and intimate acquaintance with his needs and moods would still be available. Never an imaginative

man, he had probably given no thought whatever to his daughter's temperament and character ; enough that she was his daughter and he her father, that she was solicitous, remembering, and, above all, cheerful, and that she rarely provoked even the semblance of a scene. There had been scenes with her mother too often : the result less of mismanagement on Mrs. Staveley's part than on the Colonel's a tendency to indulge an exacting nature to the full, coupled with the advantage that the position of husband too often confers. For husbands are not merely husbands : they are also contemporaries ; and as the predominant partners they have the great pull of beginning right. Daughters are of another generation, with fewer obligations, and the power actually to rebel, or, if it comes to the worst, bolt. Wives have stood at the altar and made promises ; wives have brought money with them, and marriage settlements often very adroitly drawn up in the widower's interest ; wives are too old to be influenced by detrimental new ideas. But daughters are different : daughters have made no promises, possess no financial resources, and are pain-

fully susceptible to revolutionary notions. They are capable even of asking such upheaving questions as, "Why do I owe any duty to a father I didn't choose?"

The Colonel may have lacked imagination, but some self-protective instinct had worked in him to give Ben an easier time than her mother, poor woman, had ever had. But sweet as was Ben's nature, she was modernly conscious of certain duties and loyalties to one's own individuality, and, even before she came to talk to me about it, had quite determined that now was her opportunity to strike out a line for herself. And luckily she could to some extent afford it, for in addition to a little nest-egg consisting of the accumulation of interest in her minority, she now had, in common with her sisters and brothers, an income of two hundred a year from her maternal grandmother, the terms of that shrewd old lady's last will and testament being the culmination of a long series of indignities which, in the Colonel's opinion, she had put upon him. Surely a daughter (namely Mrs. Staveley), he had said, should come before grandchildren? But the dead hand distributed more wisely.

IV

ALONE one cannot do much on two hundred a year, but by pooling expenses two persons can exist without squalor on four hundred, especially if there is also a reserve in the bank, and this was Ben's idea. Her first step would be to join forces with her friend, Melanie Ames, to whom her brother Guy, now in India, had been engaged for the past three or four years, and share her rooms on Campden Hill—nice rooms too, right at the top, near the reservoir tower.

Melanie, who had also two hundred a year, was working at the moment as secretary to a Harley Street doctor; made his appointments; answered the telephone; saw to it (I suppose) that no current numbers of any illustrated papers ever got into the waiting-room (for someone must be in charge to maintain this inflexible custom); sent out all his accounts and as many receipts as were necessary; occasionally transacted commissions for the doctor's wife, who rarely came to town but did not like to think of the

Sales going on without any of the doctor's fees to assist them ; and now and then, in the summer, spent Sunday with the family at their house at Weybridge, where there was an excellent hard court. For this she received a salary of four pounds a week, which, added to her private income, enabled Miss Ames to add butter to her bread as a regular habit and, in her own phrase, " On the top of the stearic matter now and then to superimpose a little jam, old dear."

In whatever way Ben was to augment her own private income, it certainly would not be by acting as any doctor's secretary. She felt herself to be more restless, more creative, more managing, than that. Her nature demanded the things of the moment and constant activity, and it would gall her to have to suppress anything that was up to date. But as to what she was going to do, she had not yet a glimmering. The first thing was to transfer herself to those nice rooms and Melanie's comforting, languid society, and it was during the Colonel's protracted and lavish honeymoon (which the late Vincent Lorimer paid for) in the South of France that Ben took down the

water-colours and photographs in her sitting-room in the great obsolete house in Hyde Park Gardens, with its myriad stairs and no lift, and, with such furniture and books as were hers, moved to Aubrey Walk.

She then paid a long-promised visit to the country ; and it was while she was staying there—with the Fred Lintots in Devonshire—that her great idea came to her. Like most of the best ideas, it came not with concentration and anxiety, but in a flash, and, also like most of the best ideas, it was the result of chance. I can refer to it with some authority because I was a fellow-guest and was in, so to speak, at the birth.

An American visitor being expected, the laws of hospitality (as well as those of his own country) decreed that a cocktail-shaker was essential. But there was none, nor could any shopkeeper within a radius of many miles produce one. No doubt, civilization having made inroads even on the desert, such articles might have been found on the side-board of more than one Dartmoor mansion ; but behind a counter, no ; and the unfortunate New Yorker with his (alleged) vision of England as a promised land flowing with

gin and whisky seemed to be in danger of heart-break.

“What we who live in the depths of the country all need,” said Mrs. Lintot, “is a London agent. Someone to do little jobs like this for us. I would cheerfully give five pounds a year to have a call on the services of anyone who would undertake London commissions for me. If I knew anyone like that, I could telegraph and have that shaker and all the nasty ingredients for cocktails here by the evening train.”

It was then that a brain wave swept over me.

“If you will tell me the nearest telephone,” I said, “I will arrange it through the hall porter at the club,” and I did so.

It was in the course of our conversation on the way back from this telephoning errand, on which Ben had accompanied me, that her future was practically decided: she would herself become the London representative of the Mrs. Fred Lintots of the country. Many other duties in excess of this one came to be hers, as we shall see; but the germ of her activities in the little business in which I have the honour to be an obscure partner

was the difficulty set up by the absent shaker. The Apostle James in his Epistle asks us to behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth, and the minute origins of deeds that shape our ends have always been a source of interest to me ; but I never thought that the lack of such an article as a cocktail-shaker in Devonshire would lead either to my speculating in business with my old play-mate's youngest daughter or drive me to become its historian. And here, although it is outside the scope proper of this narrative, it may be stated, as yet another example of the caprices of this illogical world, that when the American arrived he was found to be a life-abstainer.

V

THINGS on this planet are always happening at the same time ; and it must follow (since it is only through meetings that the machinery is assembled which makes the world continue

to exist) that, although parallels or divergences are the rule, now and then persons simultaneously start out upon lines of action which in due course arrive at the same point. It is fortunate that those persons are unaware of what the gods are doing with them. Life is not such fun that we can afford to dispense with the unexpected.

It chanced that at the very moment when Ben and I were discussing Mrs. Lintot's scheme at Dartmoor, Mr. John Harford, in the garden of Laycock Manor, was informing his startled mother that he had decided to chuck the law and open a second-hand book shop.

Mrs. Harford was properly horrified. The Harfords so far had been able to avoid trade.

"But this isn't trade," said her son.
"This is a lark."

"Do you call it a lark," his mother inquired, "to be covered with dust—for there's nothing so dusty as old books, and very likely catch horrible diseases—for there are no germ carriers like old books either? And"—she went on, before he could reply—"do you call it a lark to have to bargain with customers, because no one ever gives as

much for an old book as it is marked? Even I know that. That's not my notion of a lark, anyway. And you'll have to start early, and leave late, and your health will go, and your nice looks, and all the money spent on your legal career will be wasted, and all the money you are going to put into this absurd business will be wasted too. By the way, where is that money coming from?"

"I was thinking of you, darling," said her son.

"Of me! Is the boy mad?" she inquired of the flowerbeds, the trees and the universe at large. "Do you seriously think that, feeling as I do about this offensive shop, I am going to help you to open it?"

"Yes, darling," said Jack. "And it won't be quite so costly as you think," he added, "because I'm not going into it alone. I've got a partner. Who do you think is joining me?"

"I haven't the faintest notion," Mrs. Harford replied. "But I hope it's an honest man or you'll be robbed. You're as much fitted to run an old book shop alone as I am to—to—well, these are the kind of sentences

no one ought ever to begin. One used to say 'to fly' once, but every one flies now, so there's nothing in it. But you know what I mean. Who is this partner, anyhow? "

"Patrick," said Jack.

"Patrick! Do you mean Mr. St. Quentin? "

"Of course. He's mad about it. And he's got some capital too."

"Well," said Mrs. Harford, "if Mr. St. Quentin thinks it's a good scheme, that's another matter. But only for himself. What is right for him, in his crippled condition, is one thing; what is right for you, is another. Let him run the shop alone, and you go on learning to be a distinguished K.C., there's a dear. Don't be changeable, my boy."

"I'm not really changeable, mother," said Jack. "This is my first departure. And it isn't as if I need slave my way up to success in a profession I don't really care very much for. I've come to the conclusion that I'd far rather be poor in a book shop than rich by pumping up excitement and rage in the interests of clients you can't bear the sight of and probably don't believe in. And I'm

fond of books, and, as you know, I adore old Pat and in a way I feel pledged to him too after all our times together in the War; and with his one leg what else could he do? I was with him when he lost it and I feel bound to help."

"I can't agree," said Mrs Harford, "that for a one-legged man second-hand book selling is the only possible employment, but I'll go so far as to say that I like you to feel like that about him. All the same, I don't see why he should need a partner. An assistant, yes, but why my son as a partner? And also, can there be enough profit in a second-hand book shop to keep two young men?"

"We shan't roll, of course," said Jack, "but we oughtn't to starve, and there's always the chance of picking up a first folio for a few shillings and selling it at its real value. So you will put up a little money, darling, won't you? You wouldn't like me to touch my capital, I know."

"No," said his mother. "I should hate it. All I can say now is that if Mr. Tredegar approves I'll see what I can do. And of course he must be consulted as to the

premises you take, the lease, and all that kind of thing. You promise that?"

"Well, darling," said Jack, "I would promise it if I could. But I can't, because, you see, we've burnt our boats. We took the place a fortnight ago."

"How naughty of you!" said his mother. "Then nothing I can say now is of any use?"

"Nothing," he replied tragically. "Too late! Too late!"

"Where is this loathsome shop to be?" Mrs. Harford asked.

"In Motcombe Street," said Jack.

"But that isn't a popular part at all," his mother objected. "Very few strangers pass along there."

"Pat says we don't want them," said Jack. "We shall send out catalogues, and gradually get to be known. Of course we don't mind if someone comes in by chance and buys the first folio; but there'll be no fourpenny box or anything like that at the door. It's a good address, and the rent is low."

"And you've actually taken it?" his mother asked.

"Actually," he replied.

"You will break my heart yet," said Mrs. Harford.

"Never," said her son, lifting her into the air.

"Don't be so absurd; let me down!" the little lady cried.

"Not till you've withdrawn that abominable remark about breaking your heart."

"Very well then—but only under pressure."

"And not till you've kissed me like a loving and thoroughly approving mother."

"I can't do that."

"Well, kiss me anyway," said Jack, holding her still higher.

And she did. Mothers (bless them) can be very weak.

VI

It was on the following Sunday that I found myself in Aubrey Walk, discussing Ben's future with her, with Melanie Ames, and with

too or three of the young men who were in the habit of dwelling within Melanie's aura. In Guy's absence in Meerut she did not deny herself certain detached male followers. More and more do English girls seem to be acquiring similar treasure.

The two girls made a pretty contrast : Ben so quick and alert, and Melanie so casual and apparently uninterested, although with an instant comment for every situation. Already, I observed, her tardiness had begun to draw out Ben's practicality. In appearance they were a contrast too, for Ben was fresh-complexioned, with rich brown hair which had maintained its steady natural shade ever since I had known her, whereas Melanie was pale and had changed the colour of her tresses three times at least and was now meditating a return from dark to fair.

Ben was not exactly clever or witty, but her brain was nimble enough and clear enough, and her laugh of such seductive clarity and readiness as to put men on their mettle. Women who make men talk better than they are accustomed to are always popular, even when they are plain ; and Ben was by no

means plain. Indeed, she had such pleasant looks as to cause constant surprise that she was still single and unattached ; but only among those people who do not know how foolishly young men can choose their partners for life. Ben was probably too sane, too brightly normal. The feet of the young men of her acquaintance were either turned away from marriage altogether, or were dancing attendance upon creatures more capricious, more artificial, more suggestive even of decadence. Melanie, for example, with her pallor and her exotic *coiffure*, was clearly more attractive to Tubby Toller and Eric Keene, who were plying her with cigarettes and other necessities of life when I entered. Both these youths, who had been too young for the War, were now engaged in such walks of life as products of public schools and universities take to : Tubby having a clerkship in the Treasury, and Eric having one eye on the Bar, wherever the other may have been.

“ Tell them about your scheme, Ben,” said Melanie, when we were all at our ease.

“ Well,” said Ben, “ there seems to be a vacancy for a kind of agent who will do all

kinds of things for those who are too lazy or too busy or too helpless to do them for themselves and would pay to be relieved. Finding a house or flat, for example. There are heaps of people who would cheerfully give ten pounds to have these found for them. There are people all over the country, and in Scotland and Ireland, who would like their shopping done for them, particularly when the Sales come on. There are heaps of English people abroad—on the Continent, in India, in the Colonies—who want things done for them in London and have no one to apply to and trust. There is a constant demand for servants of every kind, not only housemaids and nurses, but chauffeurs and secretaries and private tutors. People want to know where they can have bridge lessons and golf lessons and billiard lessons. It's all very vague in my mind at present, but I'm sure there's something practical in it."

"It's not vague to me at all," said Tubby; "it's concrete. I've been thinking like a black while you've been talking, and I believe I've got a title. You must be original and alluring: a signboard, jolly colours, nice assistants."

"I should call it 'Ben Trovato,'" said Eric.

"Oh, don't!" Ben groaned. "No more puns on my unfortunate name, please."

"Or 'Ben's Balm for Harassed Housewives,'" Eric continued.

"Or just a notice like this," said Melanie :

DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES FORWARD SOLUTIONS WITHIN

"Be serious," said Tubby. "I've got a real title for you. What do you think of 'The Beck and Call'?"

"Very good," I said.

"I think you should have a signboard hanging out," said Tubby, "like an old inn, and on the sign, which would be very gay, something like this :—

THE BECK AND CALL
DOMESTIC PROBLEM BUREAU
BRING YOUR NEEDS TO US
FEES MODERATE

"I don't know about 'moderate,'" said

Melanie. "It's what the most expensive hotels always say."

"Yes, and 'Domestic Problems'?" said Eric. "Don't they usually mean rows between husband and wife? Admiralty, Probate and Divorce stuff?"

"I suppose so," said Tubby. "But it would be impossible to put up anything that could not be misunderstood by someone. In connexion with 'Beck and Call' I think 'Domestic Problems' might stand. And, after all, if a wife did come to complain of her husband there would be no great harm done; she would simply be told that that kind of business was not transacted and sent off to the nearest police court or solicitor."

"But you could charge her for it just the same," said Eric. "After all, knowing who is the nearest or best divorce solicitor is very special knowledge and ought to be well paid for."

"Yes," said Tubby, "I've lived in the same house for two years, but I'll be hanged if I know where the nearest police station is, or the nearest fire station, or the nearest pawnbroker. Those are the valuable facts

of life, and I am ignorant of all of them. I know where my own doctor lives, and my own dentist, but I haven't a notion where there is a strange one handy. And of course dentists never work at night. The address of a good dentist who would answer a night call would be worth a tenner to anyone. You ought to specialize in that, Ben."

"I will," said Ben. "You are being very useful to me. Go on."

"The best of everything," said Eric, hastily cutting in, "is a good thing to know. It takes a lot of finding out oneself. I've got a haberdashery chap, for instance, who is absolutely useless with socks. His vests are good, his shirts, his collars; but his socks are disgraceful. Very dear, and no wear in them at all. 'Advice as to the best shops for everything' would be a great line for you."

"I saw a shop the other day," Tubby said, "where there were Chinese birds' nests in the window. For soup. I'll give you the address, Ben. That will be something to start on."

"Yes," said Melanie, "and I know the best place for rings and bracelets made of

elephants' hair. For luck, you know. You'd better make a note of that."

"And China tea," said I.

"And Waterford glass," said Melanie.

"And Japanese artichokes," said Tubby.

"They're delicious and they're practically weeds, but how many greengrocers have them? Hardly any."

"And salad oil," said Melanie. "The awful cart-grease most people give you!"

"I'll tell you another thing worth knowing in your business," said Eric. "Places—seaside resorts—where the water isn't hard. My old father had a horror of hard water and all our summer holidays were regulated by that. But it was the most difficult thing to find out."

"I hope you're writing all these things down," said Ben. "I must have one of those big alphabetical books. I'd no idea how clever you are—you're all worth a guinea a box."

"That reminds me," said Eric. "The best chemists. Where to get the best soap."

"And the best lavender water," said I.

"And the best cold-cure," said Tubby.

"Nothing so important as that,"

"What price indigestion?" asked Melanie.

"Yes, of course," said Tubby. "I know of some ripping stuff."

"But you're going much too far," said Ben.

"Never mind," said Tubby, "you'll find it'll all help. You can't know too much."

"There's that wonderful place for jam in Paris," said Melanie. "I forget the name. It's in the Rue de Sèze: oh yes, Tanrade. You see them making it in the shop. Nothing like it. I'm sure that anyone who could act as an intermediary between English people and the best French shops would make a fortune."

"Or the other way round," said Tubby. "I'll bet you France is full of people who would like to get things from London but don't know how. Think of the awful things they have to put up with now," he went on. "Have you ever been in a small French chemist's? No one but a peasant in a smock to look after you. And their shoe leather; I mean for men. And their umbrellas. I can see an International Shopping Bureau going very strong."

"Please stop," said Ben, in mock despair.

“ You’re too resourceful. And what do you think,” she asked, turning to me, “ shall we call it ‘ The Beck and Call ’ ? ”

“ I think that’s admirable,” I said. “ I wish I’d thought of it.”

VII

WHEN Colonel Staveley, with his buxom Belle, returned from Cap d’Ail and found no daughter to receive him, he was bewildered and shocked.

Still, as everything was comfortable and the servants were welcoming and kind, and even more because it is not so simple or desirable to lose one’s temper in the presence of second wives as first, the Colonel controlled himself ; but when Ben called, he relaxed.

“ I can’t conceive why you aren’t satisfied to go on here,” he began. “ Your mo—I mean Belle—would be delighted to have you. She likes you, I know. She’s said so, often. She said so again only last night. And you like her, don’t you ? ”

"Yes," said Ben, "I do. But I don't think this is the place for me any longer. So long as you were alone I was glad to do what I could; but you've got Belle now. It's her house. It wouldn't be right—apart from anything else—for me to live here now. I can't think why you don't see that."

"She doesn't understand the servants as you did," said the Colonel. "She—she doesn't understand me. Those sandwiches you used to cut me at eleven—no one gets me those any more. I mean, not as they ought to be: thin and soft and without crust."

"I'm sorry," said Ben.

"Sorry!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Sorry is as sorry does. If you really were sorry you'd come back. Where are you pigging it, may I ask?"

"I'm sharing Melanie Ames's flat in Aubrey Walk," said Ben. "It comes far cheaper and there's plenty of room. And as soon as I can"—here she produced the bombshell—"I'm going to open a business."

For an old warrior the Colonel took the blow badly. He had no words at all at first. "Business!" he then gasped; "what business?"

To his growing exasperation Ben told him our plans.

“ Oh ! he’s in it,” said her father, referring to my own modest financial share, and adding, if I know anything about him, “ I never cared for the man, as you are probably aware.”

He stamped up and down the room for a while and then began again.

“ I’m not narrow-minded, thank God ! ” he declared. “ Whatever else I may be, I’m not narrow-minded ; but I’m bound to say I don’t think it’s quite fair to me to open an office of this sort. If you were taking up the secretaryship of a ladies’ golf club I shouldn’t mind. I’m all for women playing golf, so long as they have links of their own. Or a secretaryship to an M.P., say, as long as it wasn’t a damned Labour member. But an office with a brass plate and your name—my name—on it, no ! I draw the line there.”

“ It won’t have our name,” said Ben. “ It’s to be called ‘ The Beck and Call.’ ”

“ Oh, is it ? ” he cried. “ Is it ? I like that ! Colonel Staveley’s daughter advertising herself at anyone’s beck and call. A

nice pill for an old soldier to swallow, a nice thing to explain away to one's friends."

Ben was silent for a while. Then, "I think you're taking it too seriously," she said. "Many changes have come about since you were young. The world has given up a lot of its sillinesses, and one of them is the prejudice against people going into business. I am convinced that no girl of twenty-two ought to be just a drone."

"I can't think why you never married," said the Colonel, peevishly.

"I suppose because it takes two to make a marriage," said Ben.

"You must have played your cards devilish badly," her father retorted. "There's Alicia, she's married, even though her husband is dead. And Merrill's married. And most of your cousins are married. I can't understand what you've been doing."

"Some girls must be single," said Ben. "Why, there are millions more women than men in this country alone. I read the figures only the other day."

"It is the duty of every woman of spirit," said the Colonel, oracularly, "not to be one of

them. And what," he continued, "will you do when all the money's gone?"

"I don't see why it shouldn't succeed," said Ben.

"Succeed!" the Colonel snorted.

"Well, some things succeed," said Ben. "Everything doesn't fail. Look at the people round you: they're not all bankrupt."

"Very nearly," said the Colonel.

"They seem to have money for a good many frivolities and luxuries still," said Ben.

"Anyway, I mean to do my best to make it succeed. And I hope," she added, "that if you're in any difficulty here you'll come to 'The Beck and Call.' I must send Belle some cards when we're ready."

"You needn't trouble," said the Colonel. "If you ever see Belle or myself on your premises or catch us recognizing this nonsense of yours, I'll"—well, you know how that kind of man always finishes that kind of sentence—"I'll eat my hat."

"Don't do that, father," said Ben. "Promise me a new one instead."

"With the greatest pleasure in the world," said the Colonel.

VIII

THE Colonel was not alone in his hostility to Ben's decision. Most of the family, indeed, expressed disapproval, which is a word that was, I suspect, originally coined for no other purpose than to describe the attitude of people to any novel or independent action on the part of any of their relations, the younger ones in particular.

Ben's eldest sister, Alicia, who had settled with her two children, Paul and Timothy, at Hove, after her husband, Bertrand, was killed in the War, came hurrying up to add her voice to the attacking chorus; but she was not as whole-hearted as her father, because, never in favour of his second marriage, she was glad that Ben had left Hyde Park Gardens. That now, she agreed, was Belle's domain, and beyond keeping an eye on certain pieces of furniture and a picture or so which she had marked down as some day to be her children's, she intended to have no more interest in it. But it was not in the least her idea that Ben should live with Melanie Ames and start out

on a career of her own. Alicia's idea was that Ben should join her at Hove and help with the boys ; and she put her case strongly.

"Of course it's what you ought to do," she said. "They would be good for you and you would be good for them. They ought to see somebody else besides me, now that their poor father has passed over, and the more you have to do with children now, the better you will understand them when you have some of your own. For I suppose you intend to marry," she added sharply. "You haven't got all this absurd modern girl's dislike of men as anything but tennis and dancing partners ? "

Ben said that at the moment she was thinking not of men but of her livelihood.

"Nonsense," said Alicia. "You know perfectly well you are doing it purely from selfishness. You are excited about going into business just as other girls would be excited about their coming out. It's sheer self-indulgence. And you don't need the money," she went on ; "you have grandmamma's two hundred, or whatever it is, and if you lived sensibly with me and put it into the common stock you would have no anxieties whatever.

I am sure Bertrand would have wished it. In fact, I happen to know that he does wish it. I asked him last night."

Ben opened her eyes. "What can you mean?" she asked, "by saying that you know he wishes it, and that you asked him last night—when he's dead?"

"I don't think of Bertrand as dead," said Alicia. "There is no death. He has merely passed over. I am in constant communication with him. I am very psychic; strangely so, considering what a matter-of-fact family we are. A throw-back, I suppose." She closed her eyes. "Would you go against Bertrand's express desire?" she asked earnestly.

"I don't know," said Ben, "but in any case I should rather have it expressed to me direct."

"And so you shall if you will come to Hove," Alicia replied eagerly. "There is a Circle there which you shall join. Not that I have to call in any medium myself; I am too psychic. And Bertrand and I are one, as we always have been. But it would be necessary for you."

"No," said Ben. "I should be afraid. I

don't like that kind of thing. And it's too late anyhow."

"I think you're horridly selfish," said Alicia. "And speaking as your elder sister, almost old enough to be your mother, I want you to know that I don't think you ought to be running a business at all. It's not nice. The kind of women who run businesses are not nice; they're hard and they've usually had a past. You will acquit me of narrow-mindedness, I am sure, but that's how I feel. And I don't believe it's too late to get out of the agreement, if you've signed one. Considering the way most house-agents behave, I think it's one's duty to get out of agreements now and then, just as a lesson to them."

"My dear Alicia!" Ben exclaimed.

"Well, I do," Alicia replied petulantly. "And as for poor Bertrand, he'll be heart-broken. He had built all his hopes on your joining us at Hove."

"Is he in Hove too?" Ben asked.

"Practically," said Alicia.

"No," said Ben; "I can't come; it's impossible."

"And then there's your health," said

Alicia. "You'll lose your complexion poring over registers and accounts in London. You'll begin to look raddled; like all women in business. People will call you 'capable,' and that's the end. No one wants a capable woman, out of her office."

Ben only laughed.

"And Hove's so invigorating," Alicia resumed. "The Sea Wall! And haven't you any interest in your nephews? You were fond of Bertrand, weren't you? You always seemed to be. Are you going to neglect his boys? Ben, dear, I thought better of you."

Alicia sighed and looked like one against whom the whole world was arrayed.

"You're making me feel very guilty," Ben said. "But it's no good. I can't change now. And I believe—if this is selfishness—that a certain amount of selfishness is right. I am sure that one ought to try to be independent; every one ought. And why shouldn't it be called 'self-help' or 'self-reliance' which are considered virtues, instead of 'selfishness'? Anyway, I must go on with it now. If it fails, I may change my views altogether, or, of course, if anything happened to you, and Paul and Timothy were left

stranded, I might think it it was my duty to come to the rescue. But not now."

Alicia made a noise as of one who would live for ever.

"Besides," Ben went on, "it would only mean for a short time probably. You're not so settled as all that. Supposing you were to marry again."

"Ben!" exclaimed Alicia, "I'm shocked at you."

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," said Ben. "But people do marry again. Look—well, look at father."

"I decline to look at father," said Alicia. "I think it's horrid. At his age too."

"Well, then," said Ben, "look at Belle. She's not so very much older than you."

"I think that's almost more horrid," said Alicia. "And it's very cruel of you, I think, to say such a thing to me, knowing as you do how devoted Bertrand and I always were and still are. And the boys, too! What man wants to marry a widow with two boys?"

"I feel convinced that it has been done," said Ben. "But I apologize. And I am very sorry, but I must repeat that I am going to

be independent ; I want to stand absolutely alone. I think it's my duty."

" I'm tired of the way people use the word 'duty' when they want to please themselves," said Alicia.

" My dear Alicia," said Ben, " don't let's start all over again. You said that before. If you knew what efforts I make not to say things twice in one conversation ! "

Alicia compressed her lips with grim firmness. " Very well," she said. " There's no more to be done. But it will be terrible telling Bertrand."

" Surely," Ben suggested, " he knows already ? "

" Ah, that I cannot say," said Alicia. " All I know is, he counts on me for everything."

IX

BEN's second sister, Merrill, whose husband was a country vicar, also had something to say against Ben's project, and said it ; but

with less acrimony than Alicia. Merrill had always been easygoing.

"Of course it was quite right to leave father," she agreed. "You couldn't have gone on there, with that fat woman. And what we're going to call her I have no notion. Nothing shall ever make me say 'Mother.' What do you call her?"

"I call her Belle," said Ben. "We arranged it."

"I couldn't do that," said Merrill. "I don't believe in the word as a name anyway. I think of it as something entirely different; something, between you and me, of which I'm sick to death, as you would be if you lived in a vicarage a few inches from a church. Ugh!—bells! But the name's a problem. 'Mother' is impossible; 'Stepmother' is absurd; 'Mrs. Staveley' would be absurd too. The wisest thing is not to see her at all and then one needn't call her anything. But that," she continued, "is nothing. What I want to ask you to do is to come and live with us; and if you had a spark of decency you'd do it."

Ben made a movement of dissent.

"And it wouldn't be such a sacrifice either,"

her sister went on, "for there's lots of things to do. Egbert won't have a car, it's true, but we can get one in the village, only a bob a mile. There's a golf links four miles off and there's plenty of tennis and bridge. There are some quite decent young men; one, by the way, who's rolling."

"But there are the bells!" said Ben.

"Never mind about them," Merrill urged. "One can get used to anything—except," she added, "Egbert. Be a sport and think of your sister. I assure you, my dear, I shall go mad if I don't have someone to talk to and be with. You wouldn't have me in an asylum, would you?"

"But my dear Merrill," said Ben, "how can it be as bad as that? What is the matter with Egbert? You used to like him. I can't understand why every one seems to get so tired of their husbands or wives. It makes me glad I'm not married. You liked him once, tremendously."

"I don't say I hate him now," said Merrill, "but he's become impossible. He spends his whole life between neglecting the parish and writing his book. It's not living at all. And no one will read his book. Who wants books

on the Hittites ? I tell him he'd far better be paying some attention to the English in the village, but that makes him cross. And when he's not writing, he's complaining of being overlooked and not being made a canon. He's always perfectly sweet and polite to me, and I could slap him. Not that we quarrel : not a bit of it. Ours isn't the kind of house you could call a 'Bickerage' for a moment. But we just stagnate. He doesn't really need me and I'm bored by him. Oh, how bored ! If only he would take one or two backward boys it would be a relief, a change, but he won't. He says they would interfere with his work.

"This isn't," she went on, "the kind of life that I married for. But then, what is it that one marries for ? I know what the Church service says, of course, only too well. But surely there should be some fun too ? That is what we're brought up to believe and expect ; but I assure you, Ben, I've never been anything in Egbert's life whatever. Not really. I'm merely in his house ; I see that his meals are punctual and fit to eat ; I see that he has clean surplices ; I see that his study is dusted and the fire lit ; and I listen to his tales of woe. And that's the end of it. I'm just his

wife. He wanted me badly enough, and he got me, and that was the end. It has never occurred to him that a wife could want to be anything more than the punctual inmate of a man's house. I can't even keep a dog, because dogs get on his nerves. But he likes you—you could make him a little more human, I believe, if anyone could. Do give up this 'Beck and Call' stuff and come and help me. I'm certain it's your duty."

Ben shook her head.

"But don't you do anything in the parish?" she asked. "Don't you visit?"

"Do I not visit?" exclaimed Merrill. "Of course I do. I have to. It all falls on me. But is that what I was made for? Why, I'm only thirty-one. Is that any life for a woman of thirty-one? No, Ben dear, be a sport and come and stay with us and you and I will have some fun and you'll keep me from thinking too much and regretting too much. Egbert won't worry you a bit; he'll hardly know you're there."

"My poor Merrill," said Ben, "I wish I could. But it's too late. I've got into this business and I must stick to it."

"Very well, then," said Merrill, "let me

be your first client and get me a nice jolly curate, even if I have to pay for him myself."

X

UNCLE PAUL, however, approved, and Uncle Paul was a valuable ally. Uncle Paul was Mrs. Staveley's and Lady Collum's brother : a man of about sixty who had lived with his parents as long as they lived and then had taken rooms in Bayswater with a housekeeper. Naturally shy and unambitious, and made more shy by an unconquerable stammer, he had never gone into any business but remained home-keeping and retired, famous in the family for his mechanical skill. If a doll's house were required, Uncle Paul made it. His jig-saw puzzles had been marvels of difficulty before the term jig-saw was invented. With his lathe and other tools he added little improvements to most of the pieces of mechanism that shops carelessly put forth.

But his masterpieces were ships, possibly because his father had been a shipowner and much of Paul's odd time as a boy and youth had been spent in prowling about the vessels in harbour. The sea itself had no attraction for him ; he was the worst of sailors ; but by everything to do with ships he was fascinated.

From making models for young friends and testing them, he had come to sailing them himself, and was one of the most assiduous frequenters of the Round Pond, with the long wand of office proper to all Round Pond habitués who have Masters' Certificates.

That was his principal outdoor recreation. The only other motive that could take him from his abode was his love of music, instrumental rather than vocal, and the Queen's Hall knew few figures more intimately than this tall spare man, with a slight stoop, a pointed grey beard and highly magnifying gold-rimmed spectacles.

It has never been satisfactorily determined whether the saying about the darlings of the gods dying young means young in years or young in heart. But if it ought to run " Those whom the gods love are still young

no matter when they die," then Uncle Paul was one of the elect.

"I think," he said, after listening to the outline of "The Beck and Call" project—and you must understand that whenever Uncle Paul spoke, it was with great difficulty, the words sometimes keeping distressingly out of reach for agonizing moments (during which, like so many sufferers from this impediment, he refused all assistance) or rushing out pell-mell—"I think," he said, "it's a good scheme. Very amusing, at any rate. You will meet such lots of odd people. And you will be doing something. I don't mean," he added hastily, "that you have not been busy up to now. We have all admired the way you kept house and devoted yourself to your father. But that was routine. Now you will be in the world and having adventures." He sighed. "What fun!" he said.

Ben amplified, and in the course of the story of the genesis of her plan mentioned Mrs. Lintot's remark that she would willingly pay an annual subscription for these vicarious London services.

"Yes," said Uncle Paul, "that's of the highest importance, a guarantee. Now what

you have got to do is to write to all your friends explaining your scheme and offering to be at their service for a year at, say, three guineas each, and asking them to write to all their friends about it too, like one of these snowballs one reads of, or the American officer's prayer. Anybody living far out of London ought to find it well worth three guineas, and three guineas is nothing. Lots of them may drop off after the first year, but it would give you a start. If you get only sixty or seventy annual clients to begin with, that would ensure your rent. Some of these people would probably get their money's worth over and over again, even if others didn't. At the end of the year, you might have to raise the subscription, but in the first year you will be making your name and you can afford to be generous. I shall put down three guineas myself, but what for, I haven't the vaguest notion at the moment ; and if I get no return I shan't grumble—for the unusual reason that it will be my own fault."

"I should hate to take three guineas from you," said Ben. "You couldn't possibly make so much use of me as that, and I'd rather do it for nothing."

“Hush!” said Uncle Paul. “Don’t say such things. The dangerous words ‘for nothing’ must disappear from your vocabulary the moment you go into business.”

“How horrid!” said Ben. “But I defy you to think of anything you could want from me. When you’ve got Mrs. Crosbie eating her head off, how could you need ‘The Beck and Call’?”

“We’ll see,” said Uncle Paul. “Here’s my cheque anyway. I want to be your first client.”

XI

IN the choice of business premises Ben showed not a little sagacity. I know, for I was with her.

She began by consulting a firm of house-agents, which, like so many of those necessary but unsatisfactory organizations, appeared to consist of twins—Messrs. Charger & Charger. What the evolution of a house-agent is, no one has ever discovered, but an addiction

neither to industry nor to strict veracity seems to be an essential to their perfected state. All house-agents have youth and eloquence and make an attempt at social ease. The effrontery that accompanies the sale of motor-cars is never quite theirs: they do not actually puff tobacco smoke at their customers while leaning against the wall with their hands in their pockets, but they probably would like to.

Whether we saw either of the principals—either Charger or Charger—we never knew; but the place was full of glib young men who employed the first-person-singular in their conversations, each of whom in turn might have been Charger or Charger, but all of whom probably were not.

It was by disregarding their suggestions that Ben gradually arrived at a decision.

“I am thinking,” she said, “of opening an office where advice can be sought on all kinds of domestic problems, and I want it to be in a wealthy residential district but not in a main street.”

“Not in Piccadilly?” the young man asked.

“No, *not* in a main street,” said Ben.

"I have a very desirable upper part in Lower Regent Street," he said.

"*Not* in a main street," Ben replied.

The young man turned over the pages of a register.

"How would you like Long Acre?" he inquired.

"Would you call that a wealthy residential district?" Ben replied.

"What about the Strand?" he asked.

"*Not* in a main street," said Ben. "Besides, surely it must be in a part where women shop? The Strand is mostly full of men and tourists, isn't it? I know I personally have never been there except to a restaurant or a theatre."

"That's true," said the young man. "A shopping quarter. I understand. Somewhere off Oxford Street, you mean."

"Well, what have you got there?" Ben asked.

"I'm afraid I haven't anything," he said. "Or South Audley Street?"

"Yes," said Ben, "that's much better."

He looked through his register again.

"No," he said, "there's nothing there. But"—brightly—"what about the upper

part of a garage near the Imperial Institute ? I can recommend that most highly.”

It was then that we came out.

Taking our fate into our own hands, we spent the afternoon in walking in likely places, and at last came upon an old book shop in Motcombe Street, which is near Knightsbridge and between the distinguished and far from poverty-stricken squares of Eaton and of Lowndes. At the side of the shop was a signboard in white and light green on which were the agreeable words :—

THE BOOKLOVERS' REST

In the window were rows on rows of volumes, old and less old, some opened at the title page and others at delectable coloured plates.

The shop was evidently new, judging by the paint ; and from a window above it a notice emerged stating that the upper part was to let and was suitable for offices.

As we approached, a small and intensely waggish black spaniel dashed out of the door

with all the excitement that such dogs manifest when their masters are coming too, and a moment later a fresh-looking young man in a tweed suit, without a hat, sauntered from the shop, crossed the road and surveyed the premises with a pleased proprietary eye. After a brief space he called "Patrick!" and there came to the doorway another young man, who had a more studious air and, we noticed, limped. The first young man said nothing but slightly extending both hands, elevated his thumbs to a vertical position.

"Good," said the lame one, and then all three retired to the recesses of the shop.

Meanwhile Ben's mind was working very quickly. Motcombe Street, she remarked, was only a few yards from the two great Knightsbridge drapers, and Sloane Street with all its millinery and boots and dress-makers was close by. If two young men thought it a good enough spot to establish themselves as second-hand book sellers, might it not be equally or even more suitable for our purposes? And especially so if she could induce a Knightsbridge or Sloane Street tradesman, or both, to allow her to

put up a finger-board. At any rate, the rooms must be looked at.

In the course of the conversation that followed, Ben said that the only real drawback was that there was no private door. The upper part could be reached only through the shop. But neither Mr. Harford, the young man with the dog (whose name appeared to be "Soul"), nor Mr. St. Quentin, the young man with the limp, thought this a very serious objection.

"If *you* don't mind," said Mr. Harford, "we shan't. You will probably have more customers than we, and we shall try and bag some of them."

"Yes," quoted Mr. St. Quentin, or Patrick, "'and those that came to scoff remained to pray.' In other words, if they can't get a governess or a chauffeur from you, they may stop on the way down to buy a cookery book from us."

"That's too one-sided," said Ben. "Equally why shouldn't people who can't find anything they want on your shelves, be sent upstairs to see what I can do for them?"

"Of course," said Mr. Harford. "Only yesterday, for example, we had an old boy

from America. Americans, it seems, want either first editions of Conrad and Masfield, or something to do with Dr. Johnson. This was a Johnsonian, but he was also in need of a service flat. Now if you had been here I should have pushed him up and you would have fleeced him."

"Yes," said Mr. St. Quentin, "and then there was that rummy old bird this morning. She wanted a novel. Anything to pass the time, she said. But when she came to look round, there was nothing that she hadn't read or that she wanted to read. Dickens was too vulgar and Thackeray was too cynical. Meredith was too difficult and Hardy too sad. Trollope was too trivial and George Eliot too bracing. Wells was too clever and Bennett too detailed. Galsworthy was too long and Kipling too short. And so on. She ended by offering me a fiver for Jack's spaniel, which she called a 'doggy.' After I had repulsed the offer she asked me if I could tell her the best play that had a *matinée* to-day. The world's full of these drifters. Now if you had been here, I should have steered her to you."

"To waste my time?" Ben asked.

“ Not a bit of it. She was rolling in money ; all she needed was a directing mind, such as I am sure yours is. What she wanted was to get through the day, and you would have helped her, and business would result. As a matter of fact, she did buy something ; she bought ‘ Tom Brown’s School Days,’ for the curious reason, into which I was far too wily to enquire further, that her dear father was at Winchester.”

“ One little point, Miss Staveley,” said Mr. Harford. “ You are setting up an advice bureau. Won’t you give us your opinion of our signboard : do you think it reads all right ? ”

“ It seems to me most alluring,” said Ben ; “ unless possibly the word ‘ Rest ’ might lead people to stay too long.”

“ Well,” said Mr. St. Quentin, “ as a matter of fact we had a tussle over that and Jack won. I was for just ‘ Bookbuyers’ Corner.’ ”

“ Very pretty,” said Ben.

“ Yes,” said Mr. Harford, “ but as I very properly and acutely pointed out, this isn’t a corner.”

“ Still——” Ben began.

“ No,” said Jack, “ a corner’s a corner.”

"Very well," said his partner, "I gave in ; but what do you think he wanted on the sign as we now more or less have it ? You won't credit it, Miss Staveley. Catch hold of something while I tell you."

"Oh, shut up," said Jack.

"He wanted 'Ye' instead of 'The.' "

"No !" said Ben, in horror.

"He did," said Patrick : "he actually and infernally did. Like a tea shop. He's not altogether a bad-looking man ; he would have taken quite a decent degree but for the War ; he has played cricket for his county ; he induced me to become his partner ; and yet he wanted 'Ye' instead of 'The.' "

"Can this be true ? " Ben asked.

"Well, I stick to it," said Jack. "We are out to make a living and I know what people are. You might lose a few highbrows by saying 'Ye' but you'd get a bigger following generally. Still, Patrick here wouldn't give way. Well," he made an exaggerated gesture of fatalism, "we know what the reason will be if we're bankrupt, don't we, old Soul ? " and he patted the waggish spaniel.

"And," said the lame one, "I haven't

told you the worst. He came down one day with a design lettered by one of his architect friends,

‘YE OLDE BOOKE SHOPPE’

in which ‘shop’ had two *P*’s and an *E*. I haven’t fully recovered yet——”

“It would have meant great business,” said Jack, defiantly. “There’s a fascination about that double *P* and that final *E* that lots of people find irresistible. No matter, the die is cast. By the way,” he added, to Ben, “I suppose you’re calling yourself something?”

“I was thinking of ‘The Beck and Call,’” said Ben. “I wanted a signboard rather like yours.”

“Make it ‘Ye,’” said Mr. Harford, “and you’ll be a millionaire.”

“No,” said Ben. “I couldn’t face my friends. It’s bad enough as it is.”

“And you’ll take our upper part?” Mr. St. Quentin asked.

“I can’t say at the moment,” said Ben. “I must consider. But if I don’t it will probably only be because I don’t think

either of you is serious enough to be my landlord."

But after the lawyers had done their worst with it, Ben signed an agreement.

XII

IN assembling her staff Ben experienced a certain amount of luck in stumbling upon Miss Peterson.

Miss Peterson was one of those plain, capable but not originaive women whose destiny it is to work loyally for others. And Ben was just the kind of other for whom they work with the most zeal and fidelity. From Miss Peterson's position as keeper of the outer office and the door, she came to be known as Jan, which was short for janitress, and but for her "The Beck and Call" would probably not have lasted a month. With her untiring devotion to buttress it, it turned the corner.

Jan arrived early and left late, and, what is more, refused to go out for lunch, but ate

it furtively at her desk. Whether men eat too much lunch or women too little is a question that has never been settled ; and as they are totally different creatures there is probably no need for any comparisons. Suffice it to say that Jan could not be induced to improve her scanty and hasty repast, and seemed to be fairly healthy on it. A certain element of self-sacrifice or even mortification was necessary to her happiness ; she was a mixture of watchdog and nun. If ever she permitted herself a luxury or accepted an invitation to a party of pleasure, she did it as though performing a penance. Such was her own humility and her innate conviction that this is a vale of tears, and ought to be, that every happiness or delight was a cause of suspicion and surprise. Praise-God-Barebones and his companions planted the English soil deeper than they knew.

The only other member of the staff, at first, was a precocious London boy, certainly no Puritan, who was known by his own wish as Dolly. His real name was Arthur, which his friends, all as Cockney as himself, soon converted to Arfur, not only because that was their general tendency but because his

surname Crowne set up an additional allure-ment to do so. Arfur Crowne in course of time was reduced, on the lines often followed in the evolution of nicknames, to 'arf a dollar, and from this it had been an easy gradation to Dolly.

Dolly's age was sixteen, and he was small for it. He was also old for it, in so far as dress and knowledge of the world, or at any rate of London, were concerned. He always wore a bowler hat and carried a cane, and in his possession, on view but never known to be worn, was a pair of smart tan gloves. In addition to an exhaustive acquaintance with London's houses of variety, even in the outlying districts, football heroes, cricket heroes, cinema stars and probable winners on the flat, Dolly could give you in a moment the number of the bus you needed for any route.

Where he got the money to visit so many places of entertainment, no one at first knew; for his wages could not well be large and there was no reason to suspect him of dishonesty. But he was so regularly in funds as to lead to the suspicion that he had private means and was working at "The

Beck and Call" for a wager. So Tubby Toller maintained. And, as he said, it would be very dull to find out where the money came from, for one of the compensations in this dreary life of ours is the opportunity we get for wondering how other people can afford it.

But later the secret came out, for Mr. Harford gave it away. Mr. Harford's range of interests on the pleasant planet on which he found himself was, I ought to say, sufficiently wide to include the too often pathetic efforts to come in first on the part of those untrustworthy but beautiful animals with noble heads, glossy coats, and four slender legs on which most English men, and many English women, "have something" every day. It was Dolly's special privilege to meet in his lunch hour mysterious acquaintances with special information about the "three-thirty," and this information Mr. Harford was delighted to receive. Now and then, of course, the horse "went down," but in the main the two confederates did very well.

Dolly's post was by the telephone in the outer office, which, on occasions, could be

connected with another instrument on Ben's desk ; but his dominating desire and ambition was, by his own knowledge and discretion, to render any such connexion unnecessary. So far from sharing Jan's willingness to lunch in, Dolly was off, with his gloves and cane, immediately the clock struck one—to the Ritz or Savoy, according to Jack Harford. He was never late in returning, but sometimes stood on the step finishing a cigarette until the hands pointed to two.

Mr. Harford and Dolly may have been almost on an equality, but it was one of the jokes at "The Booklovers' Rest" that Dolly was too aristocratic to have any friendly relations with the boy—Ernie Bones—who opened and shut that abode of culture, and carried to the post such parcels as were dispatched, and once a month stuck stamps on myriad catalogues. But there are grades, right through the social scale, and Dolly stood on a plane far above Ernie's.

Ernie had never worn or carried gloves in his life. They would have looked as strange on him as a monocle in the eye of a London roadmender.

XIII

AUNT AGATHA had of course to be told. Aunt Agatha was the widow of Sir Davenport Collum and Ben's mother's sister. Her opinion on any subjects whatever doesn't really matter, but Ben would not have been happy to have left her in ignorance.

"You musn't think me narrow-minded," Aunt Agatha said, "because I'm not. Whatever else I may be, I'm not narrow-minded. But I really do think you might have chosen something better to do than to be a maid-of-all-work or a Jack-of-all-trades at the command of anyone with the money to pay your fee. You—you demean yourself. We should have dignity."

"Yes, aunt," said Ben, "but one must maintain oneself first. There is no dignity without independence."

"But surely — don't you remember Landseer's picture?" inquired Lady Collum.

"No, aunt. That was 'Dignity and Impudence,'" Ben replied.

"Yes, so it was. I had forgotten. And, after all, the words are very much alike. I can see it now. We had an engraving in the hall at home. Two dogs. Well, dear, as you were saying?"

"I was saying, aunt," Ben resumed, "that dignity without independence is only a shadow. What I want is to make my own living and 'The Beck and Call' seems to be a way. At any rate, it is worth trying."

"A horrid phrase," said Lady Collum. "'Beck and Call.' Why, it suggests dependence and nothing else. Servility even. You belong to every one but yourself; you will be London's errand girl."

"But if I don't mind that, what then?" Ben asked. "And besides, I shall reserve the right to select my jobs."

"Beggars," said Aunt Agatha, "cannot be choosers. There's a proverb to that effect and I am a great believer in proverbs. An apple a day—ah! how true!"

"Yes, aunt, but how miserable you would be if anything kept your own darling doctor away! And I believe it's really an onion, as a matter of fact."

"Onions undoubtedly are very healthy,"

said Lady Collum. "But what were we saying? Oh, yes. This office of yours. 'The To and Fro.' Where is it to be?"

" 'The Beck and Call,' aunt," Ben corrected. "I have taken two rooms over an old book-shop in Motcombe Street."

"Taken them!" exclaimed Lady Collum, in horror. "I had no idea it had gone so far as that. What is the use of my giving you any advice if the deed is done? It's like locking the garage door after the car has been stolen."

"But I don't think I was asking you to advise me," said Ben. "I was merely telling you about it, because I thought you would like to know, and in case you knew of anyone who might want to make use of me."

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" exclaimed Lady Collum. "To think that it's all settled! You're plighted to it now."

"Yes, aunt," said Ben. "The die is cast. There is no looking back. We begin next Monday."

"Plighted!" murmured Lady Collum, dreamily. "What a beautiful word it might be! Can be. Why, my dear, don't you

marry some nice man instead of opening offices ? ”

“ Well, aunt, for one reason, no one that I cared for sufficiently has ²asked me,” said Ben smiling.

“ Then you have had a proposal or two ? ” said Lady Collum, eagerly. “ I’m glad.”

“ Not very serious ones,” Ben told her. “ Only from Tommy Clinton.”

“ Oh, him ! ” said Aunt Agatha. “ And yet you’re very pretty,” she went on. “ What’s the matter with the other young men ? Let’s see, how old are you ? ”

“ Twenty-two,” said Ben.

“ That’s a little late for the young ones,” said Lady Collum, “ or much too early. Hasn’t any nice older man asked you ? ”

“ No, aunt,” said Ben, “ and I don’t know that I want one either. Marriage isn’t everything. I can imagine an amusing business being far more entertaining than a husband. But surely you see,” she went on more seriously, “ that now that father’s married again I must be independent. I can’t possibly go on living at home.”

“ Ah, yes,” said Lady Collum. “ Of course.

Poor child, yes. The cruel and ugly step-mother, my heart bleeds for you."

"But dear Aunt Agatha, she isn't cruel, and she isn't ugly," said Ben. "And I like her."

"That's your sweet nature," Lady Collum replied, "or her artfulness. And what about poor little Toby?" she resumed. "His home closed to him. I can't think what your father was about. Surely at sixty-three he might have continued to face life alone and then everything would be happy still, and poor little Toby not at the mercy of this heartless woman and you not driven out into the world to start 'The Hide and Seek.'"

"'Beck and Call,' aunt," Ben corrected. "And I haven't been driven out; I was glad to go."

"So you say," said Lady Collum. "But it's your kind heart. Anyway, it's that motherless child I'm thinking most about—poor Toby."

"But, aunt, dear," said Ben, "Toby is hardly ever at home. He's at Oxford until the vacation, and then he stays with friends. And he's six feet tall. It's far too long since you saw him. I assure you he's in no need of such sympathy."

“ Poor child, poor child ! ” Lady Collum murmured. “ It is dreadful when the cuckoo displaces the young meadow-pipits. I saw it on a film. Dreadful ! My poor little Toby ! ”

“ Well,” said Ben, rising to go, and abandoning the struggle with preconceived ideas (always a stubborn one), “ you’ll send to me if you want any shopping done while you’re down in the country, won’t you ? ”

“ Of course I will,” said Aunt Agatha. “ I’ll do all I can for you. Let’s see, what is the place called—‘ Mind the Step ’ ? ”

“ ‘ Beck and Call,’ aunt,” said Ben.

“ Of course. How funny I should have said ‘ Mind the Step.’ And yet how natural ! ” she added, sighing deeply, “ for I am always thinking about her. The step ! What a tragedy for all of you ! How could your father have done it ! Well, you *will* mind her, won’t you ? They’re all hard and all cunning. I know. I’ve read about them. And deceitful. And they are always saving and stealing, and stealing and saving, for their own children.”

“ But, dear aunt, you are so wrong about this,” said Ben. “ Belle is the kindest thing. And she hasn’t got any children of her own.”

“So she says,” was Lady Collum’s last dark utterance.

XIV

WHETHER or no Ben’s landlords made a special point of being on the premises at the hour of her arrival I can’t say, but certain it is that they were always there to wish her good morning, and an element of rivalry as to which would wish it first was not absent. It is also certain that they esteemed highly the privilege of having such an agreeable tenant.

Every one has a favourite snatch of song, which can be sung unconsciously and bears no relation whatever to the mental status of the singer. This was Jack’s, droned to an Irish melody :—

Good morning, O’Reilly,
You are looking well.
Are you the O’Reilly
Who keeps this hotel ?
Are you the O’Reilly
They speak of so highly ?
Good morning, O’Reilly,
You *are* looking well.

At quiet intervals all day this ditty reached Ben's ears from the ground floor, until it became the *motif* of her employment, and she caught herself at all kinds of odd moments murmuring it too. In fact, "Good morning, O'Reilly, you *are* looking well," was the password between Mr. Harford and herself. Mr. St. Quentin was less frivolous: his humour was of the sardonic variety; but he too had snatches of song, which also passed into Ben's repertory, chief of which was that sweet but mournful American lullaby:—

My Bonnie lies over the ocean,
My Bonnie lies over the sea,
My Bonnie lies over the ocean,
Oh, bring back my Bonnie to me.

As book sellers the two friends seemed to Ben to lack method and even knowledge, but she hesitated to judge them because she knew so little herself, and she could not but be conscious that her own business was an unprofessional affair. In fact, they were all amateurs.

Her suspicions as to her neighbours were first aroused by a visit from Mr. Harford one morning. He was carrying a volume,

and his normally careless countenance registered perplexity if not despair.

"Please help me, Miss Staveley," he said. "Patrick's out and I've no notion what this book is worth. It isn't marked. There's a blighter after it downstairs, and he looks as if he might be a dealer himself, in which case it's probably valuable."

"It's no use asking me," said Ben. "You might as well ask your dog."

"But you're so clever," said Mr. Harford. "Tell me how it strikes you as a stranger. Hold it in your hand."

"No," said Ben. "I shan't even guess. Why don't you tell him it was on the shelves by mistake and isn't for sale?"

Mr. Harford looked at her with admiration.

"By Jingo!" he said, "that's brilliant!"

*You are the O'Reilly
They speak of so highly,*

and I don't wonder."

On another occasion Mr. St. Quentin was heard laboriously ascending the stairs, impeded by his poor wooden leg. He had begun with a wonderful artificial limb, fitted with springs

and other contrivances, but, like so many other [mutilated men, had given that up for a simple stump.

“Look here, Miss Staveley,” he said, “I’m in a deuce of a fix. There’s a poor devil downstairs who’s brought in a bundle of books worth ten pounds, and he asks if I’ll give ten shillings for them. What am I to do?”

“Behave like a gentleman,” said Ben. “I should say, behave like yourself.”

“Yes,” said Patrick, “I want to. But I’m a book seller as well. I hope I’m not the sort of man to take advantage of ignorance, especially when it’s mixed up with destitution; but, after all, business is business and one can’t be buyer and seller too.”

“I think that’s rubbish,” said Ben. “Of course you can. Every dealer is, but that’s always the excuse. It makes me blush.”

Patrick looked at her as though in the hope that he might miss none of the heightened colour when it came.

“All the same,” he said, “the other day when I wasn’t in, Jack gave a fellow a fiver for a book which was only worth sixpence, owing to some missing pages which he didn’t detect.”

"I don't see that that has anything to do with the present matter," said Ben. "Surely each transaction is separate."

"Yes," said Patrick, resignedly. "You're right. I'm a swine. How I hate business! None the less," he went on, "this business is only half mine; half is Jack's. I've got to do the best I can for both of us. Of course, I shan't give only a measly ten bob; but the point is, how much more ought I to give?"

"What could you get for the books?" Ben asked.

"They ought to fetch fifteen pounds," said Patrick.

"How soon can you sell them?" Ben asked.

"One never knows," said Patrick. "It might be to-morrow, it might be next year."

"That's rather important," said Ben, automatically using words that she didn't know she possessed; "because it might mean locking up capital. I think you ought to give him something between their value to you if you could sell at once and their value if you have to keep them in stock for a year. Say seven pounds ten."

“ Good heavens ! ” exclaimed Patrick. “ You’re the Queen of Sheba.” And he plodded down again.

“ I don’t pretend to be able to advise you, Miss Staveley,” said Patrick that evening “ I’m not clever enough. But whenever you’re in any difficulty, come into the shop and we’ll try the ‘ Sortes Virgilianæ.’ It can be very comforting, and it always succeeds.”

“ Sortes Virgi——” Ben asked. “ I suppose that’s Latin, and I don’t know any. I’ve had a rotten education.”

“ Oh, no,” said Patrick, “ I don’t suppose you have. I expect you know lots of things that good classical scholars are utterly ignorant of. You can read and play music at sight, I’m sure ? ”

Ben admitted it.

“ I knew you could. I call that the most miraculous thing in the world—putting one’s fingers down on the notes accurately without any practice whatever. I’m sure Porson couldn’t do that, even if he did drink ink. Jack can do it too, confound him ! It’s the one accomplishment I have always longed for, and I could never even whistle. But the

‘Sortes Virgilianæ’—that was a game of chance and an appeal for guidance—every copy of Virgil an oracle, you know. It was like this. You were in a hole. Very well, you opened your Virgil at random and you took the first words that caught your eye as an inspired message. But nowadays people don’t confine themselves to Virgil: they take any book. Let’s try it. What is your perplexity at the moment?”

“Well,” said Ben, “I suppose it would have something to do with getting clients, being able to be of any use to them when I did get them, and being able to pay you your rent.”

“We’ll try,” said Patrick, taking a book at random from the shelf behind him, without turning round, and opening it. He looked at the page and laughed. “There you are,” he said, pointing to the passage.

The book was “The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám” and the page was that on which was the quatrain containing the line:—

So take the cash and let the credit go.

“But there isn’t any cash to take,” said Ben.

“No,” said Patrick, “but how does it go on?”

Nor heed the rumble of a distant drum.

That is the answer of the oracle. In other words, don't worry, take long views and if anyone has to suffer, let it be us and not you.”

“But what is the drum?” she asked.

“The drum is Jack and me,” said Patrick. “Your horrible, avaricious landlords.”

XV

“SOMEONE to see you, Miss Staveley,” said Jan, with a flustered face, suddenly opening Ben's door. “I'm sorry,” she added quickly and in a lower tone, “but I couldn't do anything else.”

“This way, sir,” she went on, to someone in the outer office, behind her, and in a moment who should be in the room but Colonel Staveley.

“ Father ! ” exclaimed Ben.

“ Well, why not ? ” replied the Colonel, but he looked anything but at ease. “ Mayn’t a father visit his daughter ? ”

“ Of course, father, and I’m very pleased to see you. But it’s so unexpected. I hope nothing’s wrong. Please go on smoking.”

“ Thank you,” said the Colonel, who had been careful not to throw his cigar away, although he had been holding it in such a manner as to suggest that he had done with it, but absent-mindedly had forgotten to drop it. He put it back to his lips with a sigh of relief, sat down and, with a searching eye, looked round at the files of letters and the folios and other signs of business.

“ How are you doing ? ” he asked.

“ Not so well,” said Ben, “ and not so badly. We are making both ends meet so far. But it’s very hard work. There’s so much to do, seeing people all day, that I never have an evening free. It’s then that the real task begins—writing letters, making up the books and all the rest of it. Still I like it more than not, and it’s interesting too. One never knows what the next minute may

bring. Always something unexpected. You, for example."

"I'm sorry," said her father, bluntly. "I was hoping you might be tired of it and be willing to come back."

"Please don't think of that," said Ben. "I shouldn't do that, whatever happened. There are lots of other things to do if this fails or gets too difficult. But it won't."

"All right," said the Colonel. "Then perhaps you'll look on me not as a father but as a client. Do you say client or customer?"

"Whichever you like," said Ben.

"Client, then," replied the Colonel. "What I want is a cook. Not an ordinary cook, but a damned good cook. You know. A cook who sees that beef is underdone and mutton well done. A cook who sends any meat but the very best back to the butcher. A cook who doesn't stuff apple tarts with cloves and slices of lemon. A cook who keeps time. Belle—Belle is fine, she's splendid, but she doesn't understand."

Ben laughed. "I wonder how bad your cook is," she said. "You know, father, you're not the easiest creature to cater for. And—and does Belle know you're here?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, "I told her."

"All right," said Ben. "I'll do what I can. But, remember, you'll have to pay. Everything's dearer than it used to be. What does the present cook get?"

"I think it's fifty," said her father.

"Well, you'll have to go higher than that, for a good one. Very likely to eighty."

The Colonel groaned. "If I must, I must," he said. "Life isn't worth living as it is."

"I'll send one along," said Ben.

"You're a good girl," said the Colonel. "I'm proud of you."

"Wait just a moment, father," said Ben, as he rose to go. "You haven't given me the address of a milliner yet."

"A milliner? What milliner?" the Colonel inquired.

"Where I am to get a hat," said Ben.

"You are talking in riddles," said the Colonel. "I know nothing of any hat. With a business booming like this I should say you could get your hats wherever you wished. In Paris even."

"I thought perhaps you had a special shop in mind," said Ben.

"I haven't an idea what you're referring to," said her father.

"Don't you remember?" Ben replied. "You said that if ever you entered my office you would give me a hat."

"Did I? I had forgotten. Of course if I said so, it shall be done. I'll ask Belle about a shop and let you know. What an infernal memory you have!"

Ben was as good as her word, and a new cook arrived at Hyde Park Gardens and gave satisfaction.

It is sometimes amusing to watch disapproval dissolving into esteem, mortification being transformed to pride. Not long after the new kitchen régime was in full swing the Staveleys gave a dinner party, at which the Colonel had on his right hand old Lady Philligree (widow of the famous magnate who had the big place at Moreton-in-the-Marsh). Lady Philligree is known to like her food as much as most people, and, in default of anything else to say to her host, or possibly because the topic came nearest her heart, she commented with intense appreciation on the entrée they were consuming.

"I'm glad you like it," said the Colonel.

“ The fact is, we have a new cook and she’s a treasure. It doesn’t do to extol one’s own family, but I don’t think I am breaking any social law very seriously when I say that I got her through *my* daughter. Ben, you know. Well, Ben, like so many of these headstrong, foolhardy girls to-day—since the War you know—insisted on breaking away from home and starting a domestic agency. ‘ The Beck and Call ’ she calls it. In Motcombe Street ; quite close to Knightsbridge. Well, although it is not the best form for fathers to boast, I must say she’s wonderful. No sooner did I ask her for a cook than she got me this one. She ought to make a fortune, she’s so capable. Clearheaded, cool, with a charming manner, though again I say it as shouldn’t. ‘ The Beck and Call ’ she calls it. In Motcombe Street, close to Knightsbridge. Over a book shop.”

And when, during the latter part of the feast, after half-time, Mrs. Carruthers, on his left, paid a compliment to the savoury (an *entente cordiale* of chicken’s liver and mushroom) the Colonel made practically the same reply to her.

When we are deploring the inconsistency

of human nature and the speed with which friend can become foe, let us not forget that, under other circumstances, the transition from adversary to advertising agent can be equally swift and complete.

XVI

BEN brought me occasional reports of her progress and whatever other news there might be ; and I looked forward to these visits.

“ We’ve been having the oddest applications,” she said. “ You have no idea how helpless people can be. They want advice on everything.”

“ The astonishing thing,” I replied, “ is that you can give it on such a variety of subjects.”

“ I don’t know that I can,” she said, “ but I try to. And if one is fairly emphatic, it seems to satisfy them. I suppose decisiveness is very comforting. I see them positively adding an inch or two to their stature when I just say ‘ Yes ’ or ‘ No,’ without any

qualifications to dilute those excellent words. It's extraordinary how few people seem to have any initiative. And if one can't answer a question oneself," she went on, "one probably knows someone who can. I am requisitioning all my friends. Some day I shall put an awkward client on to you."

"I hope you will," I said.

"It isn't only that they ask ridiculous things," Ben confirmed, "but they so often want something more, for nothing. 'Now that I *am* here,' they say, 'perhaps you could tell me this.' Only to-day a woman who had come about Spanish lessons for her daughter asked me, as she was leaving and had paid, what to do with a cook who stole. I asked her if she could cook well, and when she said 'Yes,' I told her to keep her, even if she stole diamonds and pearls. But it was nothing but odds and ends. 'Odds and ends are replaceable,' I said, 'but a cook isn't. The whole world wants cooks at this moment. Besides,' I said, 'to take odds and ends isn't stealing at all—to a cook. We all have our code, and a cook's code permits her to take odds and ends and smuggle them out of the house, where she would be a pillar of

honesty in the midst, say, of money or jewellery.' Every one is dishonest somewhere. My father, I'm sure, is scrupulous in most ways, but he boasts that he always does railway companies if he can. The best parlourmaids take cigarettes. The nicest people pocket matches. If you want to know something about petty purloinings by what are supposed to be the elect, ask the secretary of any women's club. And I'm told that in quite crack men's clubs the nailbrushes have to be chained.

"We have every kind of question and from every nationality," she went on. "A little Japanese woman came in the other day to know how to get lessons in English—at least, not exactly lessons. What she wanted was someone to read English books aloud with her. Not *to* her; *with* her. They were to sit side by side so that she could follow the pronunciation. She knew English perfectly, but had some of the words most comically wrong. But how natural! Indeed I don't know how foreigners ever get our words right. This little Japanese pet was completely puzzled by 'July,' for instance. She used the word as if it rhymed with

'truly.' And why not? We say 'duly' and 'unduly' and 'unruly' and 'Julius' and 'Juliet.' And then we say, 'July.' It's too absurd."

"And could you help her?" I asked.

"As it happened, I could. I remembered an old friend of ours who was only too glad to do it, and she has been writing since to thank me for giving her the opportunity of meeting anyone so charming."

"What I want to know," I said, "is how the dickens do you know what to charge?"

"There are several ways," said Ben. "There's a fixed tariff for certain things, and there's so much a quarter of an hour for interviews. For shopping I charge a fee. A time-chart is kept and they pay so much an hour and for cabs. But I don't do that for strangers, or, at any rate, not for anyone without an introduction.

"Most people," she continued, "want either servants or rooms; and I send them on to registry offices or house-agents, and share the commission. I couldn't as a regular thing go into either of those businesses myself. There would be no time left.

"Let me think of some of our recent

applications," she said. " Oh, yes ! A South African woman came in yesterday to know something about London churches. She was to be here for six months and wanted to take sittings somewhere ; could I tell her the best preachers ? They must be evangelical or, at any rate, low. Anything in the nature of ritualism she couldn't endure.

" And then," she went on, " there was a widow from Cheltenham who wanted advice about dogs. What was the best kind of dog for a lady living alone ? She had noticed that the dogs of most ladies of her own age—that is to say, elderly—were very disobedient ; but that would be no use to her. She did not want a dog that had to be led. I said that the most popular dog with elderly ladies at the moment was a Sealyham or West Highland. White, in any case. But I doubted if they were very obedient.

" She asked whether I thought a lady dog or a gentleman dog the more suitable. Really, people are marvellous."

" And how did you charge her ? " I asked.

" I didn't. I said that the matter was off my beat, and gave her the address of a dog-fancier.

“ She thanked me and went away, and ten minutes later left a box of chocolates and a bunch of flowers.

“ Then they want to know the best musical comedy ; the name of a play that it would be all right to take auntie to ; the place to buy the best linen sheets ; whether or not one has to dress in certain restaurants ; what time the National Gallery opens ; how long a car takes to Hampton Court ; how to get Sunday tickets for the Zoo ; and where one has the best chance of seeing the Prince of Wales.

“ But what most of them want,” said Ben, “ is what they call a *pied-à-terre*. You’ve no idea what hosts of people there are who would be happy if they only had a foot to the earth !—in other words, a week-end cottage. The simplest place in the world, where they can rough it, you know ; return to nature, shake the horrible city off ! But when we come to particulars there must always be a tennis lawn, hot water laid on, bathroom and so forth. Sometimes they insist on a telephone. I could let twenty of these places a week ; and there’s nothing so difficult to find ! As it is, most of the real

country folk, the cottagers proper, have been dispossessed in order that their homes may be converted for week-end purposes.

“Another thing we are always being asked for is a man and his wife. But they are difficult to get, too, because if the man’s any good, the wife isn’t, and if the wife is capable, the man drinks.

“But most of them,” she added, “I don’t see at all. Jan or Dolly disposes of them; and of course they don’t pay. But we can’t be rude to them. And after all, if you call your office, ‘The Beck and Call,’ you are rather, as Dolly says, ‘arstin’ for it.’ In fact, Dolly wants us to make a charge for everything. He produced some placards the other day, which he had spent all Sunday on, to be hung up. One was for his own desk with :—

LONDON QUESTIONS

ANSWERED TO THE

BEST OF OUR ABILITY

2/6 EACH

on it.

“And one was for Jan :—

GENERAL INFORMATION
GIVEN

2/6 EACH REPLY

“ And for my door :—

MISS STAVELEY

INTERVIEWS

AT THE RATE OF 10/6

FOR QUARTER OF AN HOUR

OR LESS

“ But I wouldn't let him put them up. ‘ No,’ I said. ‘ Save them for when you set up in business for yourself.’ ”

“ ‘ Me ? ’ he said. ‘ Not ’arf. I'm going to be a bookie.’ And I expect he is. ‘ I'd be one now,’ he said, ‘ if I had any capital. That's all you want—a little capital to begin with. The rest is like shelling peas.’ ”

“ ‘ But in that case why are you here ? ’ I asked him. ‘ Oughtn't you to be in a bookmaker's office ? ’ ”

“ ‘ I dare say I ought,’ he said. ‘ But I prefer this job at the time.’ ”

“ ‘ Why ? ’ I asked.”

“ ‘ Because, to tell you the brutal truth, miss,’ he replied, ‘ I like you.’ ”

XVII

"No," said the girl. "I don't think anyone would do but Miss Staveley herself."

She was a pretty girl, somewhere in the last teens, but at the moment she was flushed and nervous and looked tired out.

"Do you know her personally?" asked the loyal and wary Jan.

"I could hardly say 'know,'" replied the girl, "but we met at a dinner-party once. At Lady Toulmin's. Perhaps you would tell her?"

"You are quite sure it is nothing that I could do?" Jan inquired.

"Quite," said the girl.

"But Miss Staveley is very busy," Jan persisted. "We haven't got through the letters yet. Indeed, we're not really open. You must let me know what you want to see her about."

"I'm sorry," said the girl, "but that's impossible. Do please give her this card"; and Jan succumbed.

Ben, in her fortress, examined the card.

"Miss Viola Marquand," she read. "What is she like?" she asked.

"Very young," said Jan. "And very pretty. Says she met you at dinner once at Lady Toulmin's. Her furs cost a hundred if they cost a penny. One of those gold mesh bags. No rouge, though. She seems excited and worried."

"And she won't say what she wants?"

"No," said Jan. "Not to me. Not to underlings. The boss or nothing."

"Well," said Ben, "show her in; but keep an eye on the time. She oughtn't to be here more than ten minutes. Interrupt us then."

Miss Marquand entered shyly. "It's very kind of you to see me," she said, "and I have no right to bother you like this; but I'm in great trouble and I remembered how much I liked you the only time we met. Do you remember?"

"Yes," said Ben. "I remember now."

"And I was hearing that you had opened an advice bureau, and so I have made so bold as to come to you, because no one wants advice—help, rather—more than I do."

"Well," said Ben, "tell me."

"It's very simple," said the girl. "I have got to pay two hundred pounds and I haven't a penny."

"Bridge?" Ben asked.

"Poker," said the girl. "I can hold my own fairly well at bridge, but poker is too much for me. I've done with it. Can you tell me what to do? I'm at my wits' end, Miss Staveley. It's terrible."

"You poor thing," said Ben. "But, you know, this isn't my line at all. I'm here for ordinary cases, such as finding houses and chauffeurs and all that kind of thing. This isn't my line at all. Have you no one at home to confide in?"

"Oh, no," said the girl quickly. "No one. That would be impossible."

"Your father?"

"My father!" the girl exclaimed, with dilating eyes. Then she laughed. "You don't know my father."

"But surely you must have friends?"

"I don't seem to have any friends quite of that sort," said the girl. "There are plenty of people I know, but some I wouldn't ask a favour of for the world, and the others either wouldn't have any money or wouldn't

lend it. I've been going over their names again and again and they all seem wrong."

"Isn't there the family lawyer?" Ben asked. "He wouldn't give you away, even if he wasn't too sympathetic. And it's part of his business to raise money."

"The family lawyer!" the girl exclaimed, almost angrily. "You don't suppose I should bother you if I could go to him? Oh, forgive me if I sounded sharp," she said. "But I'm all out. I never slept a wink last night. But of course I couldn't go to him—he and father are much too thick. And if father knew of this, I don't know what would happen. You see it happened once before. Not so badly, but badly enough."

"Ah!" said Ben. "And you gave a promise?"

"Yes," the girl admitted. "And I meant to keep it. But this time I swear I will. What I want you to do," she went on, "is to be so kind as to tell me how money is raised. Couldn't I borrow it?"

"I'm sure you could," said Ben. "But the rate of interest would be very high, and how about paying it back?"

"Yes," said the girl, ruefully. "That's just it. I thought of that."

"And you'd have to give some security," said Ben.

"Yes," said the girl. "I thought of that too. Everything's against me."

"What about selling some jewellery? Or better still," Ben asked, "that mesh bag?"

"It would be noticed at once," said the girl. "No, I've thought of all those obvious things. And if I were to pawn, I should still have to find the money to redeem. No, it was because I had come to the end of thinking that I came to you. If you can't help me I—well, I don't know what."

She looked utterly broken.

"Well, I must think about it," said Ben, at last. "Give me till to-morrow morning and come then. But, remember, as I said, this isn't my real work, and if I am useless you mustn't grumble. Some things are too difficult."

"How kind you are!" said the girl. "I oughtn't to have worried you about it. I can see that now. But I was in such a mess. Good-bye till to-morrow, and if you can't do anything, you can't, and I must—Well, I don't know what I must do."

XVIII

BEN, left alone, thought, she tells me (to my great pride) first of me. But I was abroad and without an address. It was a matter, she felt, that must be discussed with a third person. And it was complicated by the girl having already given a promise.

By lunch-time she seemed no nearer any course of action, but on her way through the shop suddenly remembered Patrick's oracle.

"What was that way of getting guidance called?" she asked him. "When you told me not to bother about ever paying my rent?"

"Was it as definite as that?" he asked. "I'd forgotten." He laughed. "The 'Sortes Virgilianæ,'" he went on. "Every one his own diviner. If you're in a difficulty, try it again. Take any book at random and read where it opens."

Ben put out her hand and found that it had alighted upon "Coleridge's Poems."

"Now open it and glance quickly," said Patrick.

Opening it, Ben's eyes came instantly upon "The Ancient Mariner."

"Do I have to read the whole page?" she asked.

"No," said Patrick. "The title is enough. Isn't it helpful?"

"I don't see how," said Ben, and she left the shop.

"It's never failed yet," he called after her. "Either up or down, it's bound to work."

At intervals during the rest of the day Ben repeated the words "ancient mariner," "ancient mariner," "venerable salt," "antique navigator," "senile sailor." Nothing suggested anything. Perhaps, she thought, it means the sea. But what could the sea do for Miss Marquand? She couldn't—no, impossible—have meant to suggest committing suicide; and certainly she was not going to run away: that was not a solution to this kind of problem. Facing the music here.

Ancient mariner, ancient mariner. . . . Ben racked her brains to think of any elderly naval men that she might know. There was her father's friend, the Admiral, old Sir Albert Ross; but he was dead. Nor had he

possessed a very sympathetic or understanding mind. The quarter-deck manner. "Damn it," he would have said, "you've got to take your punishment. People who play cards for stakes they can't afford get no pity from me." Well, the Admiral was dead, anyway.

Ancient mariner, ancient mariner. What was the next thing to a real mariner? Why, a longshoreman, a boatman on the river. And the next thing to the real sea? The Thames. Ought she to go down to the docks and see what happened there? But why the Thames? Why not a lake? There were boats on the Serpentine, close by, and this was a lovely evening and the attendants would certainly be there and one of them might be old. In fact they were sure to be old. And in conversation something useful might occur.

Ben was on her way to the Serpentine when she thought of the Round Pond, and in a second Coleridge's meaning flashed upon her. Of course. Why hadn't she thought of it at once? Uncle Paul. Uncle Paul was the only ancient mariner in her acquaintance: Uncle Paul with his toy boats, and, even

more, Uncle Paul with his kind old heart and wise if simple old head. She would go to see him directly after dinner. Of course !

Uncle Paul, if he had known of Ben's approach, could not have been employed more suitably, both for her and for Coleridge, for he was rigging a ship. A three-masted schooner. And he looked quite old enough to be called ancient.

"Well, my dear," he said. "How nice of you to call !"

He moved away from the model and fetched the cigarettes.

"Please don't stop, Uncle Paul," said Ben. "I shall be much happier if you go on with your work. In fact, you must. And it isn't nice of me to call, really. Because I've come for advice. To bother you."

"Don't apologize for that," he said. "People like to be asked for advice. It's flattering."

Ben told him the whole story—without names—while his busy fingers were deftly binding spars and threading cordage through tiny blocks.

"And she struck you as being all right ?" he asked at the end. "You felt the thing to

be genuine? She really seemed to mean it when she said that this time it really was the end of her gambling?"

"Absolutely," said Ben.

"She must be helped," said Uncle Paul, and he went to his desk and wrote a cheque for two hundred pounds made out to his niece. "Give her this. But see that she pays it back to you, no matter in how small instalments, beginning with her next allowance. I'm afraid she must deny herself a lot of little luxuries; but that will be good for her. Yes," he said, "she ought to go without all kinds of things she's used to. But you'll talk to her like a mother and tell her so, of course."

"A mother!" Ben exclaimed. "Why, I'm not more than three years older."

"Age has nothing to do with it," said Uncle Paul.

"You are the sweetest thing," said Ben, as she folded the cheque and put it in her bag. And she hurried home.

"Well," said Patrick, putting his head in at Ben's door the next afternoon, "did it work?"

"To perfection," said Ben.

"It's a wonderful method," said Patrick.

"I prefer it to all others," said Ben.

"And, by the way, I've got a new assistant. A Miss Marquand. We're getting on, you see."

XIX

MISS MARQUAND had only been working at "The Beck and Call" for a week or so when Toby, Ben's youngest brother, paid his sister a visit.

"How nice to see you," said Ben, "but I hope you haven't come, like all the others, to reproach me for opening the place."

"Not me," said Toby. "I'm all for it. I want you to be in business and make money, because then I can borrow from you."

"My dear," said Ben, "are you broke again?"

"Absolutely," said her brother. "But have they really been pitching into you?"

"All of them but Uncle Paul," said Ben. "Even Aunt Agatha, but of course she doesn't count."

"Alicia, I suppose, wanted you to join her in Hove?" Toby inquired.

"Yes," said Ben, with surprise. "But how could you know?"

"I guessed it," said Toby. "I'm not such a fool as I look."

"I didn't know you were so clever," said Ben. "Did you also guess that poor Bertrand is alive?"

"Alive? What on earth do you mean?" Toby asked.

"I don't mean anything on earth," said Ben. "That's just it. Alicia's taken to spiritualism and she communicates with him every day."

Toby whistled. "That's topping," he said. "They ought to know everything up there: I wonder if I could get her to ask him for a winner."

"My dear boy," said Ben, "are you betting again?"

"Only now and then," he said. "And I have such rotten luck. It would pay owners to make me an allowance to keep off their horses. But what I came about," he went on, "is what is called my future. I wish you'd talk to the governor about it. He's

dead set on my going into Uncle Arthur's office when I come down ; but that means all kinds of restrictions. And how am I to keep up my cricket ? I want to play seriously for a few seasons ; they've got me down for Middlesex. I can see now that I've been rather an ass not working harder. I might have got a job then as a Sports Master at some big school, but even a Sports Master, it seems, must know something. There's always a catch somewhere. So far as the winter goes, I'm not so hopeless, because you can get jobs now as Master of Ceremonies at the Swiss hotels—to arrange dancing and ice competitions. I know two or three men who do that and have a topping time."

It was at this moment that the door of Ben's room opened and Miss Marquand's head appeared round it.

What else may be the answer to the poet's question, " Who ever loved that loved not at first sight ? " it is not Toby. For that had always been his only way, and it happened again at that moment.

" Good Heavens ! " he exclaimed when the door had closed again. " Who's that ? "

“That’s one of my assistants,” said Ben ;
“and you will oblige me by not taking her out to lunch more than you can help, because we’re busy. Also, you can’t afford it. Also, she may be already engaged.”

“But she’s beautiful,” said Toby. “She’s terrific. What’s her name ? ”

“Her name is Viola Marquand,” said Ben.

“Viola Marquand ! Great Scott ! Why, I know her brother. He’s at New. She isn’t engaged, or if she is, he doesn’t know it.”

“Why should he ? ” Ben asked. “*You* don’t know all that *I* do.”

“He’s told me about her,” said Toby. “He said I should fall for her and I have. Do ask her to come in again about something.”

“Not unless you make me a promise,” said Ben.

“Well ? ” Toby asked.

“And keep it ? ” Ben said.

“Naturally,” Toby replied. “If it isn’t too difficult.”

“Not to have another bet this year,” said Ben.

“Oh, I say ! ” said Toby. “That’s a bit thick.”

"I mean it," said Ben.

Toby knitted his fresh and candid brows.

"I may go in for a Derby sweep or two?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ben. "I'll allow that. But no betting. Promise?"

Toby promised and Ben rang her bell twice.

The door opened again and Miss Marquand's piquant little face again appeared.

"Oh, Miss Marquand," said Ben, "please come in. This is my brother Toby, and if you have a minute will you let him see the morning paper. He is interested in racing and wants to look at to-day's runners."

"My hat!" Toby gasped. "Ben, you're the limit." But his eyes were on Miss Marquand, and if ever a second sight corroborated the judgment of the first, it was then.

The introductions being completed, Ben relented. "Never mind about the paper," she said. "I was only joking." Toby groaned.

"But," she went on, "what my brother really wants is to consult the 'Scholastic Register.' Will you let him see it?"

And the young people left together.

XX

TOMMY CLINTON arriving as usual from Madeira in May, paid an early visit to "The Beck and Call," dallying awhile at the book shop, to whose allurements had now been added a few water-colours; and for water-colours Tommy had ever had a weakness. Indeed, he played a little with a paint-box himself.

"What on earth made you start this kind of thing?" he asked Ben, when their first greetings were over

"Why not?" she countered. "I couldn't be idle. It's rather fun too."

"I suppose you've got some kind of a lease?" Tommy asked. "You're bound to let the experiment run a certain time?"

"Of course," said Ben. "I shouldn't drop it unless I had to."

Tommy was silent. These hostages to fortune did not suit him in the least.

"Is the fellow downstairs your landlord?" he asked.

"I take this floor from the book shop, if

that's what you mean," said Ben, smiling at Tommy's transparency. "Did you go in there ? "

" I just looked round," he said. " I didn't speak to anyone. Conceited-looking chap, I thought, and singing too ; something about O'Reilly. I can't stand shopkeepers who don't look like it, and sing. Shopkeepers should wear black, and rub their hands. This fellow's in tweeds with a blue collar."

" That's Mr. Harford," said Ben. " His partner, Mr. St. Quentin, would have pleased you more : he's only got one leg. They were at Oxford together and then in the War."

" You seem to know all about them," said Tommy, with some bitterness. " Are they married ? "

" Oh, no," said Ben.

" Are they engaged ? " Tommy pursued.

" If you mean, Are they engaged to me ? No," said Ben.

" Neither of them ? " he asked.

" Neither or both," she replied. " You seem to have missed your vocation," she added, laughing. " You ought to have been a cross-examiner. In fact, I believe you are—very cross."

"I'm frightfully sorry," said Tommy; "but it's awfully disappointing coming back and finding you locked up in an office. I was counting on seeing such a lot of you, and now you say you've only got Saturday afternoons."

"We must make the most of those," she said.

It was on their way back from a country walk that Tommy took Ben's hand and repeated his annual question.

"What about it?" he said.

"About what?" Ben asked, with an affectation of ignorance which was not really intended to deceive him.

"'You 'eard,'" he quoted.

She disengaged her hand and laughed her soft laugh.

"I can't think why you're so horrid to me," he said. "What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing, Tommy," she said. "I like you very much. I always have liked you. But I don't want to marry you."

"Don't you want to marry anyone?" he asked.

"No one that I've yet seen," she replied.

“ Not either of those book-selling fellows ? ” he asked.

“ Certainly not,” she said.

“ But you must marry,” said Tommy, very earnestly. “ Of course you must. It isn’t right not to. What’s the matter with me, anyway ? We’ve always been good friends ; I’m not too poor ; I hope I’ve got something better than the kind of face that only a mother can love. I’ve got *two* legs. Why are you so down on me ? ”

“ My dear boy, I’m not,” said Ben. “ I have always liked you and I always shall like you, but marriage is so different. Please don’t ask me any more, there’s a dear, Tommy.”

She had said “ Certainly not ” with some firmness to Tommy’s question about her landlords ; but was it true ? She pondered on the matter that night as she lay awake. Was she so insensitive to them ? Would she absolutely turn down a proposal from either ? And if she had a preference for one, which was it ? Mr. Harford, so quick and gay and handsome and clean cut and impulsive, or Mr. St. Quentin, so quiet and amusing and lonely and in need of care ? But whoso-

ever she married, if she married at all—and why should she, for her life was very full of interest; this “Beck and Call” affair was very absorbing and it had got to be made a success; and marriage seemed so often to be the end of girls; look at poor Enid Stuart, what a wreck of a life that used to be such a lark; look at poor Daisy Forsiter, all her jolliness gone since she married that selfish young Greg—time enough to think of marriage two or three years hence when she was tired of being so busy.

So her thoughts ran.

Poor Tommy! Whosoever she married, if she married at all, would have to have more variety than that, be more of a companion. If she married at all. Someone who did everything with an air, with a natural commanding address, like, well, Jack Harford was rather like that—“Good morning, O’Reilly, you are looking well”—someone who had humour and sagacity and was in need of mothering a little like—well, Pat St. Quentin was not unlike that—“My bonnie lies over the sea.” But there were plenty of other men, too, if she really wanted one, and it was ridiculous to allow such a

trifling business accident as renting an upper floor from two young men to make these two young men the inevitable two from which she had to choose a partner for life. What rubbish !

XXI

BEN chanced to be in the front office one morning when two children came in : a boy and a girl. They looked about twelve and ten.

" Well ? " she asked.

" We came in," said the boy, " because we've got a domestic problem and we thought you would help. We saw the sign."

" Of course I will," said Ben. " If I can. Is it very difficult ? "

" It is rather," said the little girl. " It's Dad's and Mum's birthday to-morrow and we don't know what to give them."

" But surely," said Ben, " they don't both have their birthday on the same day ? "

" Yes, they do," said the boy. " It's extraordinary, but they do."

" I think it's perhaps why they married each other," said the little girl.

" It's the most amazing coincidence I ever

heard of," said Ben. "Are you sure they're not pretending?"

"Quite sure," said the boy. "Dad and Mum never pretend. And I don't think anybody would pretend a thing like that, because it doesn't really do them any good. You see it—it puts such a strain on our pocket-money—Eva's and mine—to have their birthdays come both together like this."

"The worst thing of all," said Eva, "is to have a birthday on Christmas day. Every one knows that."

"When is your birthday?" Ben asked.

"On Christmas Day," said Eva.

"What a marvellous family!" exclaimed Ben. "And when is yours?" she asked the boy. "On February 29th, I suppose?"

"Yes," he said, "on February 29th. I only have a birthday once in four years. I mean a real one. Of course, as a matter of fact, people are very lenient."

"More and more remarkable!" exclaimed Ben. "I never heard anything like it. And are you the only children?"

"Yes," said Eva.

"Before I can help you," said Ben, "I must know how much money you've got."

"We've got five shillings each," said the boy. "But of course we can't spend all that on the present because we must give some to you. Mustn't we?"

"Why?" Ben asked.

"It says so on the signboard," said the boy. "'Terms moderate.' Terms mean we must pay, don't they?"

"Not in every case," said Ben. "Not in this case. Any advice I can give to you is free, because I'm so sorry about your birthdays. But I can't advise until I know everything, so you must tell me. First about your mother. Tell me all about her tastes. Is she fond of reading?"

"Yes," said Eva.

"New books or old?"

"New books," said Eva. "They come from the library. French books too."

"Is she fond of flowers?"

"Yes," said Eva, "she likes tulips."

"And has she any favourite colours?"

"A kind of purply pink," said Eva, after consideration.

"No," said Eric, firmly; "yellow. All the French books are yellow, and that proves it."

"Does she write a lot of letters?" Ben asked.

"Not many," Eva thought.

"Does she play and sing?"

"Oh, yes, she loves music," said Eva.

"And now for your father," said Ben.

"Is he old?"

"Yes, very old," said Eva.

"How old?"

"Well, quite twenty-eight," said Eva.

"He's much older than that," said Eric ;
"he's going to be thirty-five ; he said so this morning."

"And what is he fond of?" asked Ben.

"Is he fond of golf?"

"He plays golf," said the boy, "but he's chiefly fond of fishing. He's always going off to fish at a place called Stockbridge."

"What is his favourite food?" Ben asked.

After a good deal of difference of opinion and some heat, it was decided that their father was most addicted to eggs, of which he ate two every morning boiled for four minutes.

"And do you want to join in these presents?" Ben asked, "and give each of them one that costs five shillings, or do you want to be independent?"

This led to more debate and more heat, and it was at last settled that they would rather not unite but would deal separately with their parents.

"Very well," said Ben, "this is what I suggest. That one of you should give your father a little old book on fishing which we will get downstairs, and the other should give him two very pretty china egg-cups. And one should give your mother a box of purple sealing-wax for her letters (which is a good kind of present because very likely she'll let you help with the sealing), and the other should give her a little bottle of the best lavender water. And I'm very glad you called to ask me. Where do you live?"

"Close by, in Eaton Square," said the boy. "We pass here every day and we've always wanted to come in, but we've never had a real domestic problem before."

"And what do you collect?" Ben asked. "Because every boy collects something, doesn't he?"

"Motor-cars," said Eric.

"Motor-cars!" Ben exclaimed.

"He doesn't mean the cars themselves," said Eva. "Really, Eric, you are so silly!"

What he means is, he writes down in a book the numbers of all the cars he sees and the names of the makers of all he knows. I wish he wouldn't," she added, sadly; "it makes our walks so dreary for me."

"It's the only thing that makes walks possible," said Eric.

They started to go out. At the door the boy stopped. "Are you sure we oughtn't to pay you something?" he asked.

"Quite," said Ben.

"I think you're a wonderful adviser," said Eva.

XXII

"You must pardon me for intruding without any real business reason," said the pretty woman, "but I want to apologize for my children worrying you the other day. About birthday presents."

"Oh, yes," said Ben. "They were yours, then?"

"Yes," said her visitor, "but they had no right to take up your time like that."

"I was delighted that they did," said Ben. "Children are very rare in this business."

It's a very pleasant change after the usual run of clients. And I thought it very clever of them to think of coming to me at all. Very few children would be so original."

"My name is Hill-Owen, and we live just round the corner in Eaton Square," said the visitor. "And since I *am* here, I wonder if you would give me advice as to my cook. She's young and very pretty, and she cooks very well, but she's terribly attractive to Guardsmen. I suppose good cooks are as difficult to find as ever?"

"More so," said Ben. "It's not part of my business. This isn't a registry office. But from the inquiries I get, I should say that the world's greatest need at this moment is cooks."

"Then you agree with my husband," said Mrs. Hill-Owen, "who says, 'Never mind about the Guardsmen so long as dinner is all right'?"

"I should take some precautions," said Ben. "I don't think Guardsmen ought to be there after ten, say."

"Guardsmen are very difficult to dislodge," said Mrs. Hill-Owen, "and I'm afraid to go down and interfere, she's so touchy. She

might give notice. It's the worst of this Knightsbridge district. I thought of a wonderful plan the other day, and that was to make her bring the key of the basement door up at ten every night; but as my husband said, 'How can you tell she's locked it?' It's really a terrible responsibility. And we're away so much too. What would you do?"

"I?" said Ben. "I should do my best to forget."

"Would you? How clever of you! Thank you so much. I'll try to."

This was one of Ben's odd days.

Mrs. Hill-Owen (she told me) had not been gone more than a few minutes when a Rolls Royce purred up to the door of "The Book-lover's Rest," and a richly dressed young woman emerged and made her way upwards to "The Beck and Call."

Ben, chancing to be in the front office, received her in person, and asked her requirements.

"I want," said the girl, "an engagement as parlour-maid."

"*You* want?" Ben exclaimed. "But for someone else, of course."

"Oh, no," said the girl. "For myself. I want to go into service."

"Come inside," said Ben. "I must get this clear. You want," she said, when they were seated, "a situation as a parlour-maid?"

"Yes," said the girl. "But it must be in a really good house—a nobleman's for choice."

Ben's surprise led the girl to be confidential.

"I ought to explain," she said, "especially as I've had no experience of anything but helping mother at home. The fact is dad has suddenly become rich—enormously rich—and everything has changed. We used to live in a little house in Ealing, but now dad's bought one of those great places on Kingston Hill. He's happy enough, pottering about the garden, but it's very lonely for mother and me, because many of our old friends have disappeared—frightened, I suppose—and we can't make new ones of the new kind because—well, we're not easy with them. We don't know how to behave or what to say. They've called, you see. So I thought it would be a wonderful thing if I took service in a good family and kept my eyes open. I'm very quick; I should soon pick it up;

and someone was saying that 'The Beck and Call' was the best place to come to with any inquiry, so I came. What do you think, miss?"

"You would have to keep your secret," said Ben.

"Oh, yes, of course," the girl replied.

"You'd have to leave that car behind."

"I shall love to," said the girl. "It's largely because of the chauffeur that I want to learn. He's so superior. Mother and dad, of course, will never be able to deal with servants, but I feel that after a little while I shall know enough to keep them in their place. And of course when I'm through we shall have new ones, and so start fair."

"Well," said Ben, "I think it's a most original plan. The principal difficulty is the noblemen. They're all so poor now that they probably do their own parlour-maiding. I know one personally who describes himself as the 'Gentleman with a duster,' and one of the most famous of our dukes boasts that he cleans the windows. You would take the lowest wages, of course?"

"Oh, yes," said the girl; "or none at all."

"No," said Ben, "that would be very

foolish. Never do that. You would be suspected at once ; and if the other servants found out they would be impossible to you. By the way, had you thought of the other servants ? ”

“ Oh, yes.”

“ The footman ? ”

“ Yes. But I’ve got to go through with it, and I’m very quick. You don’t think it’s unfair to the people who engage me to use them in this way ? ”

“ No, I don’t think so. All life is a lesson, and this is quite funny. But the real joke will come when you meet them later on, on level terms.”

“ Oh,” said the girl, “ how terrible ! I never thought of that. I must—I must think a little more about it,” she added, “ and talk to mother.”

She went off, and Ben watched the chauffeur’s face as she got into the car. It certainly had an expression that needed very drastic treatment.

XXIII

“ I DON’T want to be inquisitive or interfering,” said Ben to Viola Marquand, “ but I

think we ought to be frank with each other about Toby. I'm afraid that that engagement ring is his ? ”

Viola looked a little confused, but admitted it.

“ And what are your plans ? ” Ben asked. “ How long are you prepared to wait for him, and what do you propose to live on ? Don't mind those questions, but I feel rather responsible for both of you. I'm all the mother that Toby's got, and to some extent I am in charge of you as well, aren't I ? Besides, I suppose I might be said to have thrown you together.”

“ Of course I don't mind,” said Viola. “ You've been far too kind. I like Toby tremendously. I don't say I was anxious to be engaged, but he was miserable till I said yes.”

“ I'm sure he was,” said Ben. “ He specializes in misery over delays. But what do you think he can do ? And what will your people say ? ”

Viola became very grave. “ Yes,” she said, “ what, indeed ? They are sufficiently cross that I am here doing work ; but that I don't mind. Girls have to expect

that. I dare say you had some trouble yourself ? ”

Ben smiled. “ Just at first,” she said. “ But fathers soon forget. They’ve got other things to think about.”

“ Mine doesn’t seem to have,” said Viola. “ He’s bent on my marrying someone rich, and he’s afraid that working here may prejudice rich men against me.”

“ That’s absurd,” said Ben. “ Men who want to marry pretty girls can’t be prejudiced against them by anything ; that is if they really want to marry them. People do what they want. Don’t you agree ? ”

“ Yes,” said Viola, “ I think I do. But it wouldn’t convince father. Father hasn’t much imagination, I’m afraid, and when he gets an idea he sticks to it.”

“ And your mother ? ” Ben asked.

“ Mother does what she’s told,” said Viola. “ Poor mother ! We shan’t all grow like that, I hope.”

“ Not if you marry Toby,” said Ben. “ Toby may be capricious and rather tiresome, but he’ll never dictate. Toby’s idea of marriage is to be deliciously, luxuriously enslaved. But if I were you I shouldn’t wear

that ring. He's too young. If you take my advice—and I don't think you are so deeply in love as to refuse to—you will give it back to him and say that you will wait a year before you ask for it again, if then."

"But it will break the poor child's heart," said Viola.

"Not more than is good for him—and for both of you," said Ben. "Think it over, anyway. If you made it a condition that he was earning enough money for both of you—or was in the way to do so—it would be all to the good. His whole tendency is to take things too easily, which wouldn't matter so much if he wasn't engaged. But, being engaged, he must work."

"It sounds frightfully sensible," said Viola. "And not at all like me."

"Well, your father would say the same," said Ben, "and very definitely too. It's inevitable if you admit the engagement. How much better for you to suggest it amicably!"

"I'll try," said Viola. "But it's rather rough luck."

She drew the ring slowly off her finger and looked wistfully at the mark it had left.

"You really are fond of him?" Ben asked.

"I think so," said Viola.

"It's so difficult," said Ben, in one of the worst sentences ever constructed, "for sisters to understand anyone losing their heads over their brothers."

XXIV

It was early in June that I had an urgent call from Ben asking if I would help her. A Canadian woman had been in to say that her husband, who was an invalid, had one mastering wish, and that was to hear the nightingale again before he returned home, probably for ever. Ben knew nothing of nightingales; but she wanted to oblige, and would I take the affair in hand?—my acquaintance with those birds being (I assume) notorious.

I agreed.

Mr. Measure was rather a tragic figure. A wealthy Canadian of cultured tastes, he had been stricken when only in the fifties, and this was a last visit to Europe to see once again the beautiful things that he knew so well and would regret so keenly. For

“Dying,” as he said to me, “would be nothing if were it not for what we leave behind.”

They had been to Florence, to Siena, to Perugia, to Venice, to Rome, to little quiet places among the Italian hills that had old associations, to Chamounix again, to Avignon and Arles, to Puy-de-Dôme. In a day or so they were to sail for Quebec, where his home was and where his grave would be.

He had but one wish left as regarded his English visit, and that was to hear the nightingale. It had suddenly come to him as he read in a paper some reference to their season of song—he had had the idea that it was earlier and now finished—and his wife had chanced upon Ben’s signboard and had asked for information there: as it happened, very fortunately.

I called at their hotel to discuss our plan of action. Mr. Measure, poor fellow, was clearly very ill; he was thin and weak, but his eye was bright and he was full of enthusiasm for the adventure. He did not want to sleep in a country inn, but did not mind how late he returned to London. Would I mind driving in a motor ambulance with himself and his wife?

Not at all.

His idea was that we should leave London after a very early dinner and go straight to a likely spot, hear the nightingale, and drive back. If we heard one sooner, so much the better.

"I know of a practically certain place," I said, "but it is a little late. A fortnight ago would have been better. Remember, I can't promise."

It was a favourable evening on which we slid away from Mr. Measure's hotel. I had my mind on a particular meadow in Sussex, just north of the Downs, skirted by a lane. This meadow is surrounded by a high, untrimmed hedge with oaks at intervals, and there is a tinkling stream close by. A few cottages here and there in the neighbourhood complete the nightingales' requirements, for they are fond of human sounds. In this meadow, which has never disappointed me yet—at any rate in late April and all May—nightingales have the enchanting habit of singing in threes, one against the other at the points of the triangle.

Knowing by bitter experience how useless it is to squander minute directions on such

insensitive, non-receptive, unobservant, and unremembering creatures as chauffeurs, I sat on the box; not sorry either, for it was warm, and talking in a car is fatiguing.

We left London by way of Battersea Bridge and kept on the Brighton road as far as Hand Cross—over Walton Heath and down Reigate Hill and through Crawley. At Hand Cross we branched to the right, leaving Cuckfield on our left, and came through Bolney to Albourne and due south as far as Muddles Wood cross-roads. At intervals I had fancied I heard the magic notes and had slackened the car—you know how easy it is to imagine this sound—but always it was a false alarm, or the song had been only of momentary duration.

At Muddles Wood we turned to the right. The air was warm and there was no wind, only a sighing of the earth. The moon was now bright and the great bulk of the South Downs, sweetly undulating, rose against the quiet sky. We crept slowly along for a quarter of a mile and then dipped sharp to the left for fifty yards and stopped. This was the spot.

For a while there was not a sound, save

now and then a rustle in the undergrowth, the whistle of a far-distant train, a car on the Henfield road, an owl's hoot, or a dog barking.

I had begun to be assured of the worst when there came a liquid note. Then silence again; and then suddenly a burst of song. It was very brief, and there was again a disconcerting silence; but then another singer replied, and gradually their songs grew more steady. They behaved like angels; they went through everything in the repertory, and although their voices were not in the perfection of mid-May, they were beautiful enough, and one of them repeated that plaintive single cry seventeen times.

Even the chauffeur was impressed. He had heard about nightingales all his life, but this was his first experience of them. Like a canary, wasn't it?

I did not intrude upon the sick man until the time came to go. He was in an ecstasy and I wished that Ben could see him. It would have been a triumph for "The Beck and Call."

"But I should call that song a happy one," he said. "Certainly not melancholy, except

very rarely. Its charm is its volume and exultation, and the careless ease of it."

I agreed. "I am against Matthew Arnold here," I said. "To me the truest line about the bird in our poetry is in William Cory:—

Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake.

That's what they are: pleasant voices, triumphantly 'telling the world.' "

"Even Keats," he said, "makes the song a little too voluptuous and passionate, although how true to say that the nightingale 'among the leaves' has never known

The weariness, the fever, and the fret!

He paused, and then repeated, almost in a whisper, the lines:—

Now more than ever it seems rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul aloud
In such an ecstasy!

To me, though he was but a stranger, these lines, as he murmured them, were, since I knew his secret, infinitely pathetic; to his poor wife they must have meant anguish.

The next morning I called at the hotel to see how Mr. Measure was and to bid him good-bye. He re-expressed his gratitude for the night's entertainment, and said he should

die with that music in his ears. I reproved him for talking of dying soon with such certainty.

"Dying men," he said, "can prepare for death with more courage, composure, and acceptance than those who watch them, and I have no doubt that you are sorrier for me than I am for myself. Not that I want to die, but I know I must. I won't be insincere about it. I know I am going to die very shortly after reaching home, because I have the means of death always with me. I know that my trouble is incurable and that it is getting worse. Would you have me a burden on those around me? My mind, as I grow weaker, will be less clear, less trustworthy; would you cherish decay?"

I had no rebutting argument to set up.

"I have always," he went on, "dreaded this disease, and when I was hale and strong I prepared accordingly. I have no fears; any postponement is due to the fact that I want to see my lawyer again and be at home. Otherwise I should take a dose to-day.

"The greatest drawback to suicide," he continued, with a whimsical smile, "is not want of decision, but a dislike of giving

trouble. If I were to commit suicide now, it would have to be done in a hotel, and that isn't fair to the hotel. Nor should I care to be found lying in a field: that would mean a shock to someone and too much newspaper squalor after. Also a public mortuary. In any well-organized State there would, of course, be a great pool of quicklime into which, after taking poison, we could roll; but lacking that we must behave ourselves as best we can. By waiting till I get to Canada, I can complete my will, fold my arms, and die like a gentleman in bed."

"While admiring," I replied, "your determination and nice taste, I would remind you that next spring the nightingales will be singing again. You might still be alive and well enough to hear them."

"I refuse," he said, "to linger on, a wreck."

And so passed Mr. Adrian Measure from my life.

XXV

"DEAR MISS STAVELEY," ran the note which Ben found on her desk, "will you do me the

divine favour of coming to the theatre with me this evening? If so, name your play, and I will fetch you at your rooms at 7.5, and we will dine first. I do so hope you are free and that the notion likes you."

"Yours sincerely,

"JOHN HARFORD"

Ben accepted.

It was a very smart Mr. Harford who drove up to Aubrey Walk that evening and carried her off to dinner. The tweeds had given place to superlative dress clothes and a white waistcoat; and there was no dog.

He went upstairs for a moment to be introduced to Melanie, who had insisted on this ceremony. "And later," she had said, "I want to see the other one too."

"Why?" Ben asked.

"Just curiosity," said Melanie. "It is always interesting to see the men who fall in love with one's friends. And these two seem to be so different that it is more interesting than ever. Why don't you marry both?"

"Have I ever given you any reason to suppose I should marry either?" Ben asked.

"Plenty," said Melanie.

"How ridiculous you are!" said Ben.

She was really rather annoyed. "I am so tired of this notion that men and women who are friendly must be going to marry."

"It is doubtful, however," said Melanie, "if any weariness on your part will lessen the popularity of union between the sexes."

"Oh, Melanie, shut up!" said Ben. "How tired I am also of that word 'sexes'!"

"None the less, old dear," said Melanie, "there it is, and it's come to stay. And to a large extent that's why I've got to eat my dinner alone this evening."

"Again I say, shut up!" said Ben.

"How extraordinarily different you and Miss Ames are!" said Jack, as the cab started. "And yet she's very nice too. But she's so detached, so cool, so ironical."

"She's a very close observer under it all," said Ben.

"I'm rather scared of her," said Jack.

"What becomes of Soul when you go out in the evening?" Ben asked.

"He mopes," said Jack. "I've got an excellent landlady, who does her best to keep him happy, but he has no life away from me really. Sometimes when I walk and go to

the pit, I take him to the theatre and leave him with friendly commissionaires ; but it isn't a kindness because, as I can't give him any notion of how long I shall be, he spends the time in searching the appearance of every passer-by. Considering how near the ground his eyes are, this must be a very tiring and anxious occupation."

"But when you do arrive, his joy makes up for everything," Ben suggested.

"Yes," said Jack. "Dogs have wonderful compensations. Still, I doubt if the Fates were quite kind to them to make them at once so understanding and so dumb, or to us to make them so short-lived. You like them, don't you?"

"I adore them," said Ben.

"Would you care to have Soul?" Jack asked. It was a terrible wrench, but he asked it. ("Love my dog, love me.")

"Oh, no," said Ben. "Never! If ever a dog belonged to one person, and one only, it is Soul. And even if I accepted him, he would still be yours. He would be too loyal to transfer any but superficial affections. But you are very generous to make the offer at all," she added, "and I shall never forget it."

Melanie was sitting up when Ben returned. She was one of those girls who prefer the small hours.

"How do you find Mr. Harford?" she asked.

"He's very jolly," said Ben.

"Yes, but has he got anything to say?"

"Not very much," said Ben. "He isn't quite grown up. Such lots of young Englishmen aren't. I suppose it's this domination of the ball which keeps them boys. French youths, who don't play games, always look so old. But he's very nice and kind."

"I'll bet he didn't try to kiss you in the cab," said Melanie.

"Certainly not," said Ben. "Why should he?"

"So many of them want to," said Melanie. "But the older ones chiefly. All the same," she added, "if you're not careful you'll very shortly have the chance of offering to be a sister to him."

"I wish you wouldn't be so absurd," said Ben. "Your suspicious nature smirches everything. Mr. Harford likes me, I know, but that's all."

"Was he always as smart as that?" Melanie inquired.

“ I don’t know,” said Ben. “ I’ve never seen him in evening clothes before.”

“ And he made no overtures to-night ? Will you swear ? ”

“ Of course,” said Ben.

“ He didn’t offer you his spaniel or anything like that ? ”

“ Oh, Melanie, how horrid you are ! ” Ben exclaimed as she banged the door.

Melanie chuckled.

XXVI

THE Wimbledon tournament now being over, in which Tommy Clinton had survived but two rounds, that young gentleman was only too free to devote his time to Ben, and it was therefore the more galling to him to find her so busy. He called so frequently that Mr. Harford was constrained to mention the fact.

“ You will excuse me, Miss Staveley,” he said one afternoon after Tommy had left, “ but would you mind if we put a ladder against the wall for your friend to come and leave by ? ”

“ Which friend ? ” Ben asked.

"The affable gent in the Panama hat," said Mr. Harford, "who is here most days and walks through our modest but well-conducted premises as if they were a pig-sty. We don't mind a man despising the treasures of literature ; reading is, after all, a matter of taste ; but we do bar the way he scowls at us. Even Pat, mild and tolerant as he is, almost squared up to him to-day. My own idea is to exchange this poor little creature here—who shares the besetting sin of all spaniels in being too ready to make indiscriminate friends—for a man-eating mastiff. What's his quarrel with us, anyway ? Does he dislike us personally or did a book seller once try to do him in ? "

Ben laughed. "Poor Tommy ! " she said. "Be a little patient, he's going back to Madeira next week."

"An excellent place for him," said Mr. Harford.

Ben herself found Tommy rather a trial, for he not only looked at her with such hungry hopelessness, but he took up a great deal of valuable time.

His next visit was a veritable ordeal.

"Look here, Ben," he said, "I've been

working for you since I was here last and I think you'll agree that I've been rather useful. Of course I hate your being in this business—the very phrase 'Beck and Call' makes me sick, for a girl like you too!—and being mixed up with those two fellows downstairs. By the way, the lame one sings too: something about his 'Bonnie,' confound him! Well, since you're set on sticking to business, and since you won't do what I ask, I want to help you to be more comfortable and more successful. So I've been nosing about and I've found you some really good premises in a central part, far removed from this back-alley and those musical shopkeepers downstairs."

"What ever do you mean?" Ben demanded, her colour rising dangerously.

"Just what I have said," Tommy replied. "I have found you some really good premises. In Dover Street. Close to the big hotels, close to Piccadilly, and approached from the street direct by a staircase. Very important, that."

"My dear boy, no doubt you meant it very well," said Ben, with some temper, "but I can't have my affairs interfered with like this. I have a lease here, for one thing; for another,

it has become well known. For another, I don't want to move. Dover Street, no doubt, is a good position ; but I can't afford Dover Street. This is cheap and central enough. I hope you haven't committed yourself at all."

"I've got an option," said Tommy.

"Then please oblige me by instantly getting rid of it," said Ben.

"As to the higher rent," said Tommy, "you'd make that up in a jiffy when people found you had a separate entrance and didn't have to go through a shop."

"Please get rid of it instantly," said Ben. "I shan't have a moment's peace of mind till you do. I'll come down with you," she said, with a sudden foreboding of an explosion below.

"Oh, Ben," said Tommy, miserably, "and I did want to help you ! All right," he added angrily, "I'll go. And I may as well say good-bye now instead of next week. Good-bye."

"But I'm coming down with you all the same," said Ben.

XXVII

"Is that Ben ?" Toby asked over the telephone at Aubrey Walk, one evening.

"Speaking," said Ben.

"I must see you," said Toby. "At once."

"But I was just going out," said Ben.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at home," said Toby. "I'll come and go with you to wherever you're going. It's frightfully important. It's a matter of life and death."

Ben smiled. She had been expecting this.

"I was only going to Uncle Paul's," she said. "I'll wait for you."

"Righto!" said Toby. "I'll come in a taxi."

He came, looking wild and haggard.

"This is awful," he said. "Vi says she won't wear my ring for six months. And she wants me not to see her."

"For how long?" Ben asked.

"Six months: an eternity. How can I keep away from her for six months? It's too dreadful? If I had any poison I'd take it; but I haven't. And chemists are so jolly careful since those Welsh cases."

"Six months isn't very long," said Ben; "only twenty-six Sundays. You can stand that. Didn't Viola say anything else? She is still fond of you, isn't she?"

"She said so, but I don't understand. If

you're fond of anyone you want to be with them. At least, I do. I don't get this fondness that gives you the boot. She said," he went on, "that to be engaged to me was impossible until I had something to do. Her father would never allow it. If I could find something to do, with prospects of an income within six months, she would defy her father and marry me; but she couldn't as it is. Why she doesn't defy him now, I can't see."

"Well," said Ben. "I suppose that a father, as a father, has some rights—at least as long as his daughter is dependent on him."

"But Vi's earning her own living, isn't she?" Toby asked. "Don't you pay her a salary?"

"Not just yet," said Ben. "But we won't go into that. The point is, that she lives at home and Mr. Marquand is her father."

"I had a notion that all this father stuff was out of date," said Toby. "It is, in the novels I've read."

"Only if the children choose to rebel," said Ben. "And neither Viola nor you are going to. Besides, I think he's right. He's Viola's father; he's brought her up. Why should he allow her to become engaged to the first irresponsible young man who comes along?"

"Why do you call me irresponsible?" Toby asked.

"Well, aren't you? Where is your responsibility, anyway? You're only twenty, to begin with. You've only just left Oxford. What do you know?"

"I know my way about," said Toby.

"So does Dolly, my office boy," said Ben, "who's only sixteen. Probably much better than you, because he knows how many pennies there are in a shilling, which you certainly don't. But what do you *know*? What have you learnt?"

"I know a certain amount of Greek and Latin," said Toby.

"Yes, but how much? Not enough to be a schoolmaster?"

"No," said Toby.

"Do you know any French?"

"Enough to get through a French novel," said Toby.

"Yes, but not enough to explain anything to a custom house officer at Calais?"

"No," said Toby. "Emphatically not."

"What else do you know?"

"I know how to order a dinner."

"That's better," said Ben. "That's the first useful thing you've mentioned."

“ And I know a lot of men,” said Toby.

“ That’s good, too,” said Ben.

“ And I’ve been asked to play for Middlesex,” said Toby. “ And, by the way, Vi adores cricket. It’s quite the thing now for a man when he’s playing away from home to take his wife with him. Heaps of them do. Vi knows quite a lot about the game. You’d be surprised.”

“ I should forget all that,” said Ben. “ You can’t play for a county and be worth five hundred a year in a short time. If you really want Vi while you’re both young, you must think about work, and nothing but work. Do you want her as much as that? As much as to give up cricket? ”

“ Of course,” said Toby. “ Of course I do. I can’t live without her.”

“ You mean,” said Ben, “ you dislike the thought of living without her; but you’ll find yourself doing so, all right. And how much does *she* want you? ”

“ I don’t know,” said Toby. “ I don’t see why she should want me at all; but she seems to. We seem to suit each other down to the ground.”

“ And you really and truly believe that you

would like to become a married man and have a small house and go home every evening to dinner and play cricket only on Saturdays? You would look upon that as the perfect life?"

"Absolutely," said Toby.

"Very well then," said Ben, "you must act accordingly. You must remember those old fairy-tales we used to read, where the woodcutter's son, or whoever it was, had to perform all kinds of difficult tasks before he could win the princess. Your task is, as quickly as possible, to go into some business and make yourself indispensable. So far as I can see, all that Oxford has done for you, if you are to make money, is to give you an agreeable accent and nice cool manners. I fancy it's the times you've played truant in London or were at home in the vacations that have really been most useful. You couldn't learn at Oxford to order dinner."

"But what am I to do?" Toby asked. "That's the question. The governor wants me to go into Uncle Arthur's office in the city. But what's the good of that? He's got three partners as it is, all with sons. It would be years before I got a footing there."

"No," said Ben. "I shouldn't vote for

that. You'd simply loaf and gamble. I'll talk to father about it."

"It's a pity you stopped me betting," said Toby. "If you hadn't, I should be rich to-day. That priceless boy of yours gave me a tip for a 100 to 8 winner, but I didn't do it. He's a marvel. He knows the whole thing—trainers, jockeys, pedigrees, courses—and he hears things too. Your friend Harford follows his advice like a baby."

"You promised," said Ben.

"I know," said Toby, "and I'll stick to it; but I think it was a mistake."

"No," said Ben, "it wasn't. But, anyway, we'll forget it and concentrate on the future. I'll go and see father first. After all, it's his job to see that you are started in something, and meanwhile don't be depressed. You ought to be proud to be put on your mettle for a girl like Vi. It makes a knight of you! You'll be happier now, won't you?"

And Toby promised.

XXVIII

BUT Colonel Staveley once again avoided a responsibility, for chance made me the solver of the problem.

The very next morning, as it happens, I had a letter from my old friend Marrable Leigh.

Marrable Leigh was one of those men who move amiably and quietly about on Tom Tiddler's ground picking up gold and silver. He was in no business and he was in all. He was on a Board here and a Board there, and he had a complimentary pass on every railway in the country: a privilege that is extended only to those who can afford to pay for it. To the rich shall be given, and Marrable Leigh was permitted as seldom as possible to pay for anything. Even his wine merchant implored his acceptance of a dozen, just to try, and theatrical managers were always sending him boxes. But he deserved his good luck, for he was a benign and philanthropic creature, and he had the softest white hair I ever saw.

"I wonder," he wrote, "if you know of a nice young man who could manage a county club. There's a very fine house and estate in Surrey going for a song, and I think it would be fun to make a residential place of it, with plenty of lawn-tennis courts and a golf links, billiard-rooms, and so forth. A young athletic man with brains, and plenty of

friends, but not necessarily experience. The amateur is often best for this kind of thing. My idea is perhaps to live there myself and make a hobby of it as well as a home. You may come in on the ground floor if you like."

Following the line of least resistance, I took this letter at once to "The Beck and Call."

Ben read it and her excitement was intense. I never saw her look so animated and indeed beautiful: her colour was brilliant.

"Oh, dear!" she said, with a sigh that was sheer relief and content, "how amazing! And to come to-day too!"

She took the telephone and called for a number.

"Is that you, Price?" she asked. "Miss Ben speaking. Is Mr. Toby down yet? He's having breakfast. Well, tell him to come instantly to Motcombe Street. Very important. Call a taxi for him."

"Oh, dear, how happy I am!" she said. And then she told me about Toby and his affairs.

"Of course Toby's exactly what is wanted," she said. "He has heaps of friends at Oxford, and there are father's club friends, too. He's very good at games. He's mad to throw

himself into something and prove that he isn't just a dud. And there's this love trouble to incite him to do more than his best. Don't you agree? "

" Well," I said, " it wouldn't matter if I didn't. Having come here for advice I shall take it. But, as it happens, I do agree. I think Toby ought to be splendid, and it is like Marrable Leigh's instinct to fasten on that type."

When Toby came in he took fire at once. " Of course I can do it," he said. " I'm used to managing. Although no one knew it I deputized for our bursar lots of times, behind the scenes. And I know of a ripping butler out of a job at this moment, at the Carterets' at Hurley, you know," he explained to his sister. " They're giving up their house. He's a nailer ! "

Ben looked proudly at me.

" And if the governor was allowed to take a few shares it would be all to the good," Toby continued. " It would interest him in it."

Ben looked still more proud. " Not such a fool as you thought him, this boy," her expression seemed to say. And how true it is that opportunity so often makes the man !

"Couldn't we see Mr. Marrable Leigh now?" Toby asked.

"I think we might ring up," I said; and we did so and made an appointment.

Let it suffice to say that we spent a most amusing day motoring to Fairmile Towers, exploring the house and grounds, and motoring back.

That evening Toby dined with Marrable Leigh; and the next day Miss Marquand was again—under the rose—wearing his ring.

XXIX

"Look here, Ben," said Colonel Staveley, "something awful's happened and I want your help."

He was unusually smart in appearance, Ben noticed.

"Tell me quickly," she said.

"It's in this cable," said the Colonel. "Merrill's husband."

Ben read the message, which stated that the Rev. Egbert Bourne had died of pneumonia in Minneapolis a day or so before.

“Merrill’s got to be told,” said the Colonel.

“Of course,” said Ben. “You’ll go down at once, won’t you?” She reached for the “A.B.C.”

“Well, the fact is,” said the Colonel, “I can’t. Most unfortunate, but I’ve got an old engagement for to-day and I can’t get out of it. One of those postponed things which it’s idiotic to put off any more. For three years now I’ve promised to go to Ascot and each time something has occurred.”

“But surely Belle wouldn’t mind—considering everything,” said Ben.

“Belle?” replied her father. “Oh, yes! But it isn’t Belle. Belle doesn’t care about racing. It’s Lady Dunster. I should take Belle too, of course, if she wanted; feel it my duty to; but she doesn’t care about racing, and it would be too absurd to disappoint Lady Dunster again. On such a fine day, too. And, after all, it isn’t as if he died here. All those thousands of miles away! So I thought you’d be the good, kind girl you always are and just nip down to Astingham. I don’t think it will be so very painful. Merrill never seemed to me to care much for him.

“I’ve got a taxi waiting,” he went on, “so

I'd better not stay any more. Of all forms of wasting money, letting a taxi tick up while it's standing still is the silliest."

And he was gone.

Ben's lips shaped themselves to whistle, but no sound came. "It's lucky for us that mother had some nice feelings," she permitted herself to think.

She called Jan.

"I've got to do down to the country," she said, "and I may stay the night. Tell Miss Marquand to open everything and act as if she were me."

"No one could do that," said the loyal Jan.

"Well, as nearly as possible then," said Ben. "This is my address if you want anything special," and she hurried off.

At the station she sent a telegram to Merrill to announce her imminence, and then she settled down in the compartment to consider the situation.

Poor old Egbert, she thought. What an arid life! To a large extent wasted, with the kind of waste that is going on on all sides. What did he marry for? He thought he was in love, or, at any rate, in need of Merrill. But he wasn't. He no sooner acquired her

than he forgot her ; she became furniture ; all he wanted was himself and the opportunity to get on with his foolish book, which didn't matter to anyone. Everything was sacrificed to that ; his blood turned to ink ; he ceased to be interested in actual present-day life ; his sympathy changed to a pedantic curiosity ; he gave what was meant for his fellow-creatures to a Biblical tribe that had been dead for thousands of years.

And how many other men were like him ? They didn't all write about the Hittites, but they had their absorbing Hittites all the same, whether business Hittites or play Hittites, and so their altar promises became scraps of paper and the precious hours slipped away. What a muddle ! What a muddle !

And Merrill ? Fortunately she was of a more equable nature than so many a neglected wife ; fortunately she had no great depths, or, at any rate, if she had, no man had discovered them. Egbert had been lucky in his choice. Many another woman would have taken things into her own hands and have secretly saved something from the wreck. But Merrill was too light-hearted, too simple. And now perhaps she would

marry again—she was only a little over thirty—and be happy: marry a plus-four man, with a taste for dancing and the theatre, who, if he ever thought of the Hittites at all, thought of them as a Central African race who made bearers for hunters of big game.

That was Merrill's right husband, and they would have a large house in the country, and two or three children, and come to town for the season, and if he did any work at all it would be purely as a J.P.

There was nothing to meet Ben at the station, and when she reached the vicarage the first thing she saw was her unopened telegram on the hall table.

Mrs. Bourne was playing golf, said the maid.

Poor Merrill, what ought to be done? Ben wondered. Was it fair to spoil her game? But, on the other hand, was it fair to let her go on and give a chance to malicious tongues?

Ben decided to walk to the links, and no sooner did she get there and observe Merrill and her partner than she realized that in all probability the plus-four man had already arrived.

Merrill, under the solicitous tuition of this tall and very good-looking country gentle-

man, was about to dig out the ball with a heavy iron when she caught sight of her younger sister.

At first she could not believe it, and then, "Ben, you darling!" she exclaimed, flung away the club and was in her arms.

"Whoever thought of seeing you here!" she went on. "But how splendid! Let me introduce Captain Andrews."

After a few conventional words, the Captain, who had tact as well as good looks, said that since Ben was there he would ask Mrs. Bourne to release him from his engagement to lunch with her; nor would he take any refusal.

For this Ben was very grateful to him, and it set him high in her estimation.

"But I want you to know my sister," said Merrill.

"And I want to know her," he said; "but to-day, I am sure, you have much to talk about. I'll order the car and drive you home."

It was while Merrill was in the club-house that Ben had an opportunity of speaking to the Captain.

"That was very thoughtful of you," she said; and she told him the nature of her errand.

" Good God ! " he exclaimed, but in accents, she fancied, more of surprise, or even relief, than of sorrow. " Good God ! I think," he added, after a moment, " I'll send my shover with you. Perhaps you will be so kind as to make my apologies to your sister," and he walked away.

" Is Captain Andrews married ? " Ben asked, as they whirled along.

" No," said Merrill.

" Does he live near here ? "

" Yes," said Merrill. " Between Petersfield and Midhurst. He's got a beautiful place. And now, you darling," she said, " tell me truly why you came down. Much as you love my *beaux yeux* I know it wasn't for them."

" It was to fill them with tears," said Ben.

" What do you mean ? " Merrill asked anxiously. " What has happened ? "

" Egbert," said Ben.

" Egbert ? Not dead ? " said Merrill.

" Yes," said Ben. " In America ; pneumonia."

" Merciful heavens ! " Merrill exclaimed.

Grief and joy can inhabit amicably a very small house. But in Merrill's case grief was

rather more like pity, and joy a consciousness of release. Only a dazed consciousness, though, at the moment.

“Poor Egbert, poor old Egbert,” she murmured. “He didn’t have much fun.” And then, “Poor Egbert, what a long way to go to die ! ”

She was silent for a long while.

“I suppose I ought to do things,” she said.

“Of course,” said Ben. “There is so much to do. You must write to his relations. No one knows but you, I believe. You must write to the Bishop about the living. You will have to get clothes.”

“I suppose so,” said Merrill. “Yes, of course, clothes.”

“And you ought to cable to America.”

“What about ? ” Merrill asked.

“Well, what do you want done with—with Egbert ? Sometimes they embalm——”

“Oh, no, he must be buried there,” said Merrill. “Not here. Dying so far away, he must be buried far away. He had no real interest in this place. Some day, perhaps, I might go over there and see his grave. Where was it ? ”

“Minneapolis,” said Ben.

“ Yes, he was to lecture there,” said Merrill. “ Some day—oh,” she exclaimed, “ I must let Captain Andrews know ! ”

“ He does know,” said Ben. “ I told him.”

Merrill looked at her. “ That’s why he sent the chauffeur,” she said. “ I see.” Her perplexity gave way for a moment to a smile.

XXX

“ SAY,” said the American, addressing Mr. Jack Harford, and stooping to pat that casual tradesman’s inseparable companion, “ is this a dog fancier’s or a book store ? ”

“ We sell books and water-colours,” said Jack ; “ or, at least, we keep a stock of books. But this spaniel belongs to me and is not for sale.”

“ I’m sorry,” said the American. “ I was looking for a flea-trap. But what about this ‘ Beck and Call ’ sign ? How can I get there ? I’ve got some questions to ask. Is it a good place ? ”

“ Very,” said Jack. “ The office is run by a Miss Staveley, and she seems to give satisfaction. But it depends rather on what you

want. Through the shop and up the stairs."

"I'll try," said the American. "These chancey things often pan out best."

He ascended the stairs, and after Jan had, in Dolly's phrase, passed the rule over him, he was admitted to Ben.

"My name's Barclay Corbet," he began. "I see you solve Domestic Problems, so perhaps you can solve mine. This is what I'm becking and calling about: I want to spend a few weeks in real England. Not the England that most of my countrymen are shown, but something that you'd call essentially 'old world.' Don't mention a cathedral," he added hastily; "I've had all the cathedrals I want and all the vergers. Don't mention a watering place, or the Dukeries, or anything like that. Don't mention Oxford or Cambridge. And above all don't mention Stratford-on-Avon. I want retirement. What I want is a place where there's no railway within miles, no corrugated iron roofs, no waiters in clawhammer coats, but pretty waiting-maids named Kate and Lucy instead, and no boys calling winners. And I want there to be a saddler in it making saddles in

the midst of the smell of leather, and a churchyard with the graves all crooked and all over moss. And spaniels; yes, there must be spaniels. And another thing, a rookery. Can you do this?"

Ben furrowed her forehead.

"I wonder," she said, "if Shaftesbury would do? It's in Dorset: very old, very quiet and self-contained, and high up on a hill like an Italian town, like Siena."

"That settles it," said Mr. Corbet. "If it's high on a hill, it's no good to me. I've had all the climbing I want. And if it's like anything Italian, it can fade away into the back seats. I've done with macaroni. No," he went on, "think again. Think of something where there's a river to loaf beside and a water mill."

"A water mill! Oh, I know," exclaimed Ben—"Bibury!"

"You seem mighty struck on places ending in 'bury,'" said her client.

"It was you who insisted on a churchyard," Ben retaliated.

"So it was," said the American, "but for æsthetic purposes only. Still, tell me about this Bibury."

“Bibury is a dream,” said Ben. “It’s all grey stone, and every house looks as if it grew there. But they’re beautiful too, and even the tiniest cottages have mullioned windows and delicious gables. The barns are like cathedrals—without,” she added hastily, “any vergers—and the cattle-sheds are like cloisters. It’s in Gloucestershire. It’s miles from a station, and there’s a trout stream, and—if you value that, but of course you don’t—the people still touch their caps and the little girls curtsy. And when I was there last there certainly weren’t any waiters—only nice girls, even if they weren’t named Kate and Lucy. But their caps were white. And there are millions of rooks, and if you were very lucky you might see a kingfisher.”

“It’s too good to be true,” said the American. “Show it me in the ‘A.B.C.’”

“I can’t,” said Ben. “It isn’t there. You have to go to Cirencester.”

“Better and better,” said the American. “Places not in the ‘A.B.C.’ have a special appeal for me. And bury or no bury, I’ll go there. Is the food good?”

“Didn’t I say it was a fishing inn?” Ben replied.

"Well, young lady," said the American, "you've put me wise to what sounds like a very good thing. Tell me how I pay you."

"I don't think you do," said Ben. "Not this time. You must come again and let me do something more practical for you."

"It's a bet," said the American. "I'm very much obliged to you, young lady. You're the brightest thing I've struck in this country yet. *Au revoir!* We shall meet again."

On his way through "The Booklovers' Rest" he paused to ask Jack if he knew a place called Bibury.

"Know it?" said Jack. "I should think I do. It's one of the most beautiful spots in England."

"Bully," said the American; but he had sufficient native scepticism to ask if the bright girl upstairs did not have an interest in the inn.

"Because she's been recommending it?" Jack asked.

"I just wondered," said the American. "No offence," he added quickly, as Jack's face darkened.

"It's just as well you said that," Jack replied, "or by jingo——" His fists relaxed.

"Now look here, young man," said the

American, "forgive me. I meant no harm. And I like you for your feelings. I'll insure my life and come here again."

A few weeks or so later Mr. Barclay Corbet, who was as good as his word, was again announced by Jan.

"Miss Beck," he said, greeting Ben, "I've come to thank you for your advice about an English village and to ask you to help me some more. But this time it's a real business proposition. I've bought Bibury Grange and I want you to furnish it for me as a place should be furnished and find me some good servants. Will you?"

Ben collected her startled wits. "Of course," she said. "When do you want to go in?"

"In three weeks to the minute," said Mr. Corbet, looking at his watch.

"Three weeks!" Ben gasped.

"Yes. I can't wait any longer. I'm going over to New York for a day or two to settle some affairs, and I want when I return in exactly three weeks to find the house ready for me to live in. I want to go straight there and settle down and be happy. Will you do it?"

"But——" Ben was beginning.

"No 'buts,' Miss Beck," said the American. "Here's a plan of the house, every room measured up. Take it and get busy. And here's a cheque that will more than cover everything, and the bank is ready to let you have more on your signature, if you'll kindly write one out for me for reference. I haven't a minute now. The signature, please."

He rose.

"But I don't know your taste," said Ben.

"It's yours," said the American; "or rather, I should like it to be."

"Do you want a butler and a footman or only women?" Ben called after him.

"Nice women, named Kate and Lucy and Alice and things like that," he replied, as he left the room.

"And what about wall-paper?" she remembered to ask at the top of her voice.

"White distemper," he called back, and was gone.

XXXI

WITH plenty of money one can acquire most of the less important things of life; and Ben

was not stinted there. So we had three terrific weeks. I say "we" because I was in it.

We went to Bibury that evening, with an expert from one of the big furnishers, and early the next morning we were busy starting the work. Then we hurried back, with a full plan of house and garden, and began to compile catalogues of necessities. There are printed lists to be had from the big furnishers, and to these we added every kind of minute accessory. Ben wanted to leave no loophole for criticism whatever. Ten times in a night I would wake up and think of something that might be forgotten and jot it down; and if I woke up ten times, Ben probably woke up twenty, for this commission was her great chance.

I thought in this way of:

Nut-crackers

Goloshes

Pepper mill

Pond's Extract

Court Plaster

Order for newspapers

Garden seats

Fishing tackle

Cigars and cigarettes

Lavender sachets

Paper clips

Notepaper die.

Ben was taking Mr. Barclay Corbet at his word and making her own taste control the whole scheme. This meant grey carpets and rose curtains, all of which had to be put in hand instantly. Then there were rush mattings and linos and rugs and blinds. Everything was new: there was no time to hunt for the old; but it was the best new, and we saw that every drawer opened easily. Fortunately two of the essentials of an American's house that take most time to supply—central heating and the telephone—were there already.

When it came to decorative inessentials we were cautious. Pictures, for example. It is very difficult to buy pictures for other people, as every one who has ever been in a hotel sitting-room will agree. Yet there were those great bare, white distempered walls.

The pictures being an acute problem, Ben, with deep cunning, left them to me.

"But I haven't seen your Barclay Corbet," I said. "A man can be anything in the world until you've seen him. How can I

choose ? Does he look like a hunting man ? ”

“ No.”

“ That shuts out sets of coloured Alkens, which might be just the thing for such a place : Alken, Sartorius, Ben Marshall, all those fine old horsy fellows. Does he suggest exotic tastes ? ” I asked.

“ No.”

“ That puts a stopper on Japanese prints—as a rule such a safe line ! And oil paintings would cost too much. And mezzotints of beautiful women, after Reynolds and Gainsborough, also dear, might not please him.”

It was then that Mr. Harford came to the rescue. “ If he likes Bibury so much,” he said, “ it follows that he must like Old England. I’ll frame up a lot of our water-colours—De Wint, Birket Foster, William Callow, Tom Collier, David Cox, Varley—and if he likes them he can keep them, and if not I’ll take them back. And now I come to think of it, he wanted to buy my dog, the swine ! Called him a flea-trap ! I’ve got some engravings of spaniels and setters after Stubbs—I’ll hang those in the hall.”

We settled the books in the same way. A certain number were decided upon without any question, such as the "Encyclopædia Britannica," Dickens and Thackeray, and then a mixed collection was put together by Mr. St. Quentin : to be retained or returned. All were supplied by that enterprising firm "The Booklovers' Rest" on the principle, as Ben said, of keeping Mr. Corbet in the family.

The few vases and bowls that were necessary were simpler : there are so many non-committal shapes and colours now.

Mr. Harford did not confine himself to supplying the pictures and books, but himself superintended their arrangement in the house, and when I went down to Bibury for a last look round two or three days before the time limit was up, in order to have the chance of supplying any last-minute deficiencies that might occur to any of us, I found that pleasant young gentleman among the people staying at the inn. Although a second-hand book seller, he seemed to have views on everything else too, together with a knack of getting things done, while in addition he found time to throw a fly now and then over the rapid waters of the Coln.

“ Mr. Harford has been very kind,” Ben said. “ I’m sure he’s needed in London, for Mr. St. Quentin has sent him several telegrams ; but he wouldn’t go back so long as there was any bother here.”

We went over the house together, and it was undoubtedly an achievement. Between us we had, I believe, covered the ground ; Mr. Harford, with diabolical thoroughness and perhaps a touch of malice, having actually provided the library with a cuspidor.

The time being ripe, Ben and I returned to London—Mr. Harford, having given in to his partner’s S.O.S.’s the day before—for Ben preferred not to be present when her client arrived. She argued that a house may be described as more ready to live in if there is no one to welcome you but your own people. But she left a little note expressing her hope that she had succeeded in her task, and adding, “ There is a corkscrew in every room.”

XXXII

It was, I imagine, the presence of the cuspidor which tickled Mr. Barclay Corbet’s fancy

and provoked him to the series of telegrams which he despatched to Ben. They came at intervals for a day or so. I can remember a few, with the replies :

Corbet Bibury to Beckancal London :

Please explain curious article by library fire-place.

Beckancal London to Corbet Bibury :

Sorry if I have been over-zealous.

Corbet Bibury to Beckancal London :

Do not seem to have any bellows.

Beckancal London to Corbet Bibury :

Look in oak chest in hall.

Corbet Bibury to Beckancal London :

Gardener clamouring for secateur.

Beckancal London to Corbet Bibury :

In cupboard in summer-house.

Corbet Bibury to Beckancal London :

Cannot find any shaving paper.

Beckancall London to Corbet Bibury :

Tear up "Times."

And then came Mr. Barclay Corbet in person to express his absolute satisfaction and to make Ben and her staff a handsome present, and then to spend some hours downstairs in fixing up his shelves properly.

"Whoever thought I wanted an 'Encyclopædia Britannica,' " he said, "is the world's worst clairvoyant. What I want is the works

of A. Trollope. They're good to read and they're good to send you to sleep."

XXXIII

ALICIA, better dressed than usual, with a new vanity bag and a rather dashing hat, had been seated in Ben's room for many minutes before she could bring herself to be explicit and admit that she had received an offer of marriage. From a widower, a retired iron-master, living at Hove. In one of the avenues, she added; with his sister: a horrid woman. They had met at a séance, for he, too, was interested in spiritualism and was in communication with his late wife. At least he had tried to be, but that lady had refused to be communicative because, she said, there was someone antipathetic to her in the room.

"You, I suppose," said Ben, in her blunt way.

"I don't know why you should say so," said Alicia, hurt.

"I don't see why she should rejoice in your presence, anyway," Ben replied. "It can't be much fun for dead wives, out of it

for ever, watching their husbands preparing for a second marriage."

"That's just it," said Alicia, with a groan.

"What do you mean?" Ben asked.

"Nothing," said Alicia, and was silent for quite a long while.

"Do you want to marry him?" Ben asked.

"I don't dislike him," said Alicia, "but it is very sudden. I had never expected anything of the kind to happen, or indeed thought about it. As you know, I was anticipating a lonely life dedicated to the boys. And if it weren't for the boys I shouldn't consider it now, for an instant. But of course it would be good for them. He is so fond of them, and a man is a better influence than a weak, fond mother."

"So you will say yes?" said Ben.

"I don't know, oh, I don't know," said Alicia, dismally, with a glance at her pocket mirror. "You see," she added, "there's Bertrand. He ought to be told."

"I thought you said that he knew everything about you," said Ben.

"So I have thought," said Alicia. "But he ought to be told formally. And that can be done only through the medium, and I

don't want her to know. I've never liked her, apart from her calling. Not a lady, by a long way. Not even the third drawer! But if Bertrand knew, wouldn't he have let me know? Some little message of encouragement? Surely! But no, nothing. I used to feel so certain of him, but now it's all changed. Do you think I'm becoming less psychic or that he's cross?"

"I hope you're becoming less psychic," said Ben. "You oughtn't to marry retired iron-masters and be psychic too. Bertrand was a very just man," she continued. "He couldn't be so unreasonable as to wish you to be deprived of the company and consolation of a second husband."

"I'm not sure," said Alicia. "I feel that he counts on me, and I may lose him if I marry again."

"I suppose, to a certain extent, you would," said Ben.

"You think so?" Alicia asked eagerly.

"Yes, I think you would," said Ben. "It's only natural. And I think if you married you would want to, too."

"Want to lose Bertrand?" Agatha asked in amazement.

"Yes. It would be very awkward to have both."

"I suppose it would," Alicia admitted.

"And besides," said Ben, "after all, you may have been mistaken about conversing with Bertrand at all. The whole thing may be an hallucination, proceeding from yourself. The wish the father to the thought, you know."

"Do you think so?" Alicia asked with some excitement. "Do you think I have imagined it all and Bertrand and I have had no communication?"

"I think it quite possible," said Ben. "You'll never be able to prove it, of course. Anyway, from what I remember of Bertrand, he would want you to be happy, and he would like his boys to be looked after."

"You think he would?" Alicia asked.

"I'm certain of it," said Ben.

"Then you would marry Mr. Redforth?"

"If I liked him sufficiently, and trusted him, yes," said Ben. "In any case I should not let the vague possibility of Bertrand's disapproval deprive me of the chance of new happiness."

"Ben, you're a darling!" said Alicia, kissing her impulsively. "I'll do it."

“ And what about Mr. Redforth’s sister ? ”
Ben asked.

“ Oh, she must make her own arrangements,” said Alicia.

XXXIV

WALKING in Kensington Gardens to-day whom should I meet but Ben’s Uncle Paul, with his latest yacht on his arm ; and he seemed almost to welcome the opportunity of sitting down for a while to chat. For we are not the most intimate of acquaintances ; not because of any inherent antipathy, but because an acute observer would probably detect in each of us a slight suspicion of the other—a tincture of jealousy—each of us wishing to be the nearest and dearest among Ben’s middle-aged friends. Her capture of a young man we should accept not with joy but with resignation—for it would be according to nature—but we should hate to see her adding another friend of fifty to her retinue.

We began, as we usually do when we meet, by mentioning her. It is a sign that true

intimacy is lacking when a third person is called in as an ice-pick. And how often it happens !

“ Have you seen Ben lately ? ” I asked, hoping fervently that the advantage was with me.

“ She came in to see me last evening,” said Uncle Paul, with all his usual difficulty of utterance, and my heart fell. (But of course relatives don’t count. Relatives are in the line of least resistance. The real test is when a stranger is made a friend of.)

“ How do you feel about the business ? ” Uncle Paul asked. “ Do you think it is really thriving ? Do you think it is too great a strain ? ”

“ I don’t think so,” I said. “ And she does it so well ; she’s so happy doing it that a little strain wouldn’t matter.”

“ I went into the book shop underneath the other day,” said Uncle Paul, “ all unbeknown to Ben, to have a look at those young men. I suppose you’ve seen them ? ”

I had seen them often, confound them ! “ Yes,” I said, “ once or twice.”

“ And how do they strike you ? ” Uncle Paul inquired. “ Because, you know, I sup-

pose——” He stopped for a while. “Well, I wonder what you think of them,” he said.

“I am sorry to say,” I replied, “that I don’t see anything very wrong with either.”

He looked at me through his highly magnifying gold-rimmed glasses. Then he laughed.

“I felt a little like that myself,” he said. “But we mustn’t be dogs in the manger: old men like us.”

(Not so old as that, all the same! He must speak for himself.)

“I could wish that the quiet one had more legs,” said Uncle Paul. “But I suppose that his disability is all in his favour with such a born manager as Ben. Would he be your choice?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I sometimes think I should prefer her to take the jolly one. And I like a man to be complete.”

“The jolly one might get on her nerves after a while,” said Uncle Paul. “High spirits and facetiousness can ruin a marriage almost as easily as egotism and irony.”

“I don’t think Harford’s humour is as virulent as that,” I said. “I saw a lot of

him at Bibury. I thought his gaiety rather attractive. He has some brains, too. His principal fault—and I wish I could share it—is that he finds life an adventure and a joke. But he will be cured of such heresies as those all too soon. Nothing so enrages the Powers above as to see anyone down here daring to be like that. And they have all the weapons of chastisement and correction so handy ! ”

“ Well, I shall put my money on the lame one,” said Uncle Paul.

“ But why should she marry either ? ” I asked. “ She does not strike me as so inevitably a marrying girl.”

“ Geographical conditions largely,” said Uncle Paul. “ There they all are, so absolutely on the spot.”

“ I should have thought they would be jealous,” I said.

“ I’ve no doubt they are,” said Uncle Paul, who seemed to me to know far too much for a stammering recluse given to Round Pond navigation. “ And if one of them is not accepted, or both aren’t refused, pretty soon, ‘ The Booklovers’ Rest ’ will dissolve partnership.”

"As bad as that?" I remarked.

"I think so," he said. "It's astonishing what a disturbing element in the lives of two young men one young woman can be."

"Yes," I said, "and it's more astonishing when it's such a sensible girl as Ben, who would not be bothered to make mischief with anyone, but merely wants to go her own way and be busy. But what does Nature care about 'The Becks and Calls'? Nature has only two ideas in her obstinate old head. One is that people should fall in love and become parents, and the other that they should grow old."

XXXV

"You may think us very foolish," said the tall man, as he seated himself.

"Or very greedy," said his wife.

"But we want some advice about food, and seeing your signboard, which reminded me of the inn my father used to keep in Helmsley," the man continued, "we thought we'd come in and ask. But," he said, "I

never thought to find a beautiful young lady like you, miss. You are 'miss,' I take it?"

"Yes," said Ben, laughing.

"Somehow," said the tall man, "our difficulty is more one to put to an older woman. But it's like this. My wife and I are just back from New Zealand, where we've lived ever since I was twenty. I've done very well, and we're having a look round London. We're staying at the Hotel Splendid, you know. Everything bang up. Private suite. Gold clock under a glass shade."

"Which doesn't go," said his wife.

"Steam heat," he continued, "that dries up all my tobacco. Everything perfect, in fact. But we can't get the food we like. You see, miss, we're very simple folk, and we want the old-fashioned things. All the way home we have been thinking and talking about the things we would eat, and now that we're here we can't get them. They serve them, but they're not right. Sausages and mashed—I know just how they ought to taste; but at the 'Splendid' they taste of nothing. And lots of things I used to be so fond of at home they don't serve at all. I can't get a pork-pie—'porch-peen,' as we

used to call it. When I asked the head waiter for cow's heel, I thought he'd throw a fit. Batter pudding, boiled onions, apple dumplings; it's no good, they can't make them to taste of anything, or they can't make them at all. They've got such a horror of the flavour of apple that they smother it with lemon and cloves. Now, miss, couldn't you tell us of some smaller places—we don't mind how small or how common—where we could get some of the old homely stuff? My poor wife here is wasting away."

"Oh, John, it's you that want them much more than I do," said his wife.

"I don't know much about food myself," said Ben, "but I've heard my father say that there are certain things that no restaurant can ever do as well as home cooks. He says that no restaurant can make bread sauce or horse-radish sauce properly. No restaurant can be trusted with mushrooms. My advice to you," she continued, "would be to cut out London altogether, unless you were set on it, and go either to a country inn or to a farm, where the milk isn't watered and the cream hasn't any boric acid, and the eggs are this morning's, and things taste as they

should. London never gets anything really fresh. Why don't you go to your own Yorkshire?" she asked.

"We shall later," said the tall man. "But we want to see London first; and meanwhile we're starving."

"Then you must go into lodgings," said Ben, "where there is a good plain cook."

"John is so fond of the 'Splendid,'" said his wife. "He's always wanted to stay in that kind of hotel and waste his money on red carpets and sit in lounges and watch the actresses."

"Then stay at the 'Splendid,'" said Ben, "but eat at simpler places. It would be amusing to pay five pounds for a bed and five shillings for meals. The management ought to know about it—it might do them good. But wait a minute," she went on, "I've just thought of something."

She rang the bell and Dolly entered.

"We want your advice," she said. "Do you know of any eating-houses where old-fashioned food is well cooked and tastes like itself?"

"Plenty, miss," said Dolly. "There's a place in the Hampstead Road with a placard

up that says 'Everything as Nice as Mother Makes It.' "

The New Zealander slapped his thigh. "Now you're talking!" he cried. "Does it really say that? That's what we're looking for. 'Everything as Nice as Mother Makes It'—my! but that's a great sentence; that's literature. Where is this place, boy?"

"In the Hampstead Road," said Dolly. "But there are others too, very likely. And I can tell them about sausages, too, miss, and tripe and onions. Famous places. And stewed eels, miss."

Ben shuddered.

"This is great!" said her client. "Now, look here, miss," he continued, "this seems to me to be a bright boy. Let us have him for a few days to show us round, and name your own price. He'll take us to the places we want to see, like the Tower and the Zoo and Westminster Abbey, and he'll show us where to eat."

"What do you say, Dolly?" Ben asked.

Dolly was obviously flattered; but he had the business at heart.

"I was wondering if I could be spared," he replied.

“ Well, if you can be, what do you think your time is worth ? ” Ben inquired.

“ Including fares,” he said, after some thought, “ and taking into consideration the distress and upheaval caused here by my absence, fifteen bob a day, exclusive of lunch.”

“ We’ll pay that,” said the New Zealander, cheerfully, and the bargain was struck. Dolly had become, for a week, a courier.

Later that same afternoon, Ben told me—it was one of her mixed-grill days, as she called them, when every one was odd—a plainly dressed young woman asked to see Miss Staveley on very pressing private business, and was admitted.

“ You won’t know me, miss,” she said, “ but my mother was your Jane.”

“ Jane ? ” replied Ben. “ You don’t mean Jane Bunce ? ”

“ Yes,” said the girl. “ The one who was with the Colonel and his lady for so long and only left to be married.”

“ Of course,” said Ben. “ We are all very fond of her. I can remember her perfectly, although I was so small. I hope she is all right.”

“ Yes,” said the girl. “ But father——”

“ Tell me,” said Ben.

“ It’s like this,” said the girl. “ Father’s been ill now for months and months, and somehow mother heard about you setting up here as a kind of advice-giver. And she said ‘ You go along to Miss Ben’s and ask her. I’m sure she wouldn’t object, for old sake’s sake.’ ”

“ Tell me,” said Ben again.

“ It’s like this,” the girl resumed. “ Father’s been ill for months and months, and you know what sick folks are, how they get their minds set on things ? Well, he sits in a chair at the window watching the motor-cars go by. We’re in Peckham, you know, and motor-cars go by all the time, and even more on Sundays, and—well, miss—he’s never been in one in his life. In motor-buses, yes, but never in a car. Motor-buses don’t count. They’ve got solid tyres ; they’re public. But a shiny private car with rubber tyres, all his own for the time being—he’s never been in one of those ; and he sits there at the window and it’s his only wish. But you see, miss, he can’t ever do it now, because he’s that weak, and the doctor only gives him another two or three days.”

"Well?" said Ben.

"Well," the girl went on, dabbing her eyes, "well, mother told me to come and ask you if you think it would be very wrong—too extravagant, I mean—if we were to give him a motor funeral? As a surprise, miss, of course? What do you think, miss? What may I tell mother?"

"Give her my love," said Ben, "and tell her most certainly to do it. And tell her to come and see me when the funeral's over."

XXXVI

"MAY I come in?" asked the bronzed, soldierly-looking man, as he opened the door of Ben's room, having brought his handsome face and easy charm to break down, with their usual success, Jan's opposition.

"My dear Cecil!" Ben exclaimed, rushing into her brother's arms, "what brings you here? I thought you were in Paris."

"So we were," he said, "but I had to leave in self-defence. Yvonne was ruining me. We were to have stayed there a month, but I should never have got away at all if I hadn't

put out all my strength and insisted on coming now.

"The clothes that child buys!" he continued. "We're heading straight for Queer Street. I see that you solve domestic problems; well, if anyone ever asks you for advice as to marrying a foreigner, tell them not to. The answer is in the negative. Foreigners are all right in their place, but don't marry them."

"Poor Cecil!" said Ben.

"No, it isn't as bad as that," he said. "Yvonne and I get on very well. But she's a foreigner, and once a foreigner, always a foreigner. They never get to understand. I can't make her realize that I'm not rich. She thinks that all Englishmen must be rich. She has plenty of relations in the French Army—naturally—and they are poor enough, but an English officer must necessarily be wealthy. Nothing that I can say or do has any effect. I show her my accounts; but I might just as well be exhibiting a bridge score. She has no idea of money or figures whatever. And if by any chance a glimmering that I may be telling the truth enters her brain, she says 'Ah, but your father is rich. Some day he

will die—he is an old man—and then you will be rich too.’ They’re so practical, the French. They go straight for what they want, and what she wants is her father-in-law’s death. But, as a matter of fact, as I have told her, judging by the governor’s general appearance to-day, he is far less likely to peg out than I am. He’s as skittish as a two-year-old on step-mother’s money ; and he and Yvonne are as thick as thieves. They’re at some function or other together to-day—Ranelagh, I believe. Thank God you can’t buy clothes at Ranelagh ! ”

“ No,” said Ben, “ but you can see them and get envious and plot terrific campaigns for to-morrow.”

Cecil groaned.

“ As a matter of fact,” he said, “ I don’t see what I’ve gained by bringing her to London. There’s a Rue de la Paix here too ! The old joke had it that first you paid and then you rued, but I don’t see how I can pay. It’s her only fault, but it’s deadly. I can’t put a notice in the papers disowning her bills, because I’m not that sort, but it’s getting very serious, and if something doesn’t happen or someone doesn’t leave me a fortune, I

shall be up against it. When you see her, Ben, do try and make her understand."

"Of course I'll try," said Ben. "What a pity you haven't any children! If she had something like that to occupy her, she'd forget about dress."

"Not Yvonne!" said Cecil. "If Yvonne had been the old woman who lived in a shoe, she'd have had a different dress to do every whipping in."

"Doesn't she read?" Ben asked.

"She lies on the sofa with a book," said Cecil, "but she's not a reader. She's at heart a *mannequin*; but she's a darling too," he added hastily. "Don't think I'm not in love with her still. I am. I adore her. But heavens! she's extravagant: I've had to give up polo entirely because of it. She doesn't know it, but I have. I pretended I'd strained my back."

That evening Ben and Yvonne met at Colonel Staveley's.

"But, my dear Ben," said Yvonne, in her pretty broken English, "you would not 'ave me shabbee?"

"That would be impossible," said Ben. "But poor old Cecil isn't rich, you know."

“ Ah ! ” said Yvonne, giving Ben a pat with delicate ringed hands, “ ’e ’ave spoke with you about me. And you say ‘ I will defend my big brozzer against this—this—so naughty butterfly ? ’ Is it not so ? ”

“ Cecil adores you,” said Ben. “ I wish you had some children.”

Yvonne’s large brown eyes filled with tears.

“ And I,” she said. “ Always I think of it. But *le bon Dieu*, ’E say no.”

XXXVII

NOT long after the close of the Barclay Corbet episode Mr. Harford waylaid Ben as she passed through the shop.

“ I was wondering,” he said, “ if you would break a chop with Soul and me this evening ? Anywhere you like ? ”

Ben agreed.

“ You shall not be restricted to a chop,” said Jack. “ Order anything in season or out of it. I’m rich to-day. I sold a lot of things to another Yank. They’re the book seller’s friends ! Pat’s at Leamington at a

book sale—and I flatter myself he'll be surprised when he comes back."

"There are two ways of being surprised," said Ben, remembering the incident of the imperfect copy.

"That's a very nasty one," said Mr. Harford. "I credited you with a shorter memory. But the insult shall be washed out in red wine, or even, if you say the word, in the yellow and effervescing juices of Epernay or Rheims. Money is no object. Consider me this evening as a Quaritch, or even a Rosenbach."

"As a matter of fact," said Ben, "I am in need of a particularly good dinner, for I have had a trying day. More than one thing has happened to tire me, and my last client—or would-be client—did more than tire, she humiliated me."

" 'How come?' " asked Jack, who had added that detestable transatlantic locution to his vocabulary, chiefly with the meritorious if frivolous purpose of exasperating his partner.

"A very offensive woman called half an hour ago in a motor-car many yards long—you may have noticed her—to ask me to

make arrangements to take her little Peter out for a walk three times every day while she is away in Paris," said Ben. "I was very angry and refused."

"Is Peter her little boy?" Jack asked.

"Little boy!" said Ben. "Nothing so unimportant. It's her Pekinese. When I refused she was furious. She almost accused me of being an impostor. She said that my business was to solve domestic problems and that no domestic problem was so acute as the exercising of dogs."

"I wish I'd known," said Mr. Harford. "I saw her go out. If I'd known, I should have offered her some suitable books: "Self Help," by Smiles, or "It's Never too Late to Mend." The—the——"

"Hush!" said Ben. "People who hang out signs can't be choosers."

"Now that we are firmly entrenched in this corner," said Mr. Harford, after they had finished their soup, "I've got a proposition to lay before you. I was useful at Bibury, wasn't I?"

"Very," said Ben.

"I helped in bucking the men up and getting things done?"

"Very," said Ben.

"And you don't dislike me?"

"Not particularly," said Ben.

"Well," said Mr. Harford, "what I was thinking is that you and I might do very well in partnership."

Ben flushed.

"No," he said quickly. "I don't mean what you think I mean—at any rate not at the moment. But you're not engaged, are you?"

"No," said Ben.

"Thank Heaven!" said Mr. Harford fervently. "But look here, Miss Staveley, I swear I didn't ask you here to ask you that. It was sprung on me. I swear I didn't. You believe me, won't you?"

Ben expressed her belief.

"When I said 'partnership,'" he resumed, "I meant business partnership, although—When I said partnership I meant business partnership. Because it seems to me that you and I could do a lot of things together very profitably. You could get this kind of commission again—old Corbet is probably singing your praises all over the place to other impulsive and rich Americans, and that will

mean business—and I could act as your overseer.”

“But what about ‘The Booklovers’ Rest’?” Ben asked.

“Well, Pat would run that; or, if need be, I’d retire. You know, Miss Staveley, speaking in strict confidence, I don’t believe I’m a born book seller. Honest, I don’t.”

Ben laughed. “What a wonderful discovery to have made!” she said.

“But,” he went on, quite gravely, “I do believe I have a *flair* for getting the best out of people under me.”

“There won’t always be a trout stream,” said Ben.

“Now you’re making fun of me,” he said. “I’m really serious. I feel all tied up and congested in that shop among mouldy books. It’s all right for Pat—he’s a literary cove, and his one desire is to read books and write them.”

“Does he want to write?” Ben asked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Harford: “that’s his one ambition. But he can’t afford to. He has to make a living. If he were rich he’d chuck book selling to-morrow and take to

authorship ; and he'd be jolly good too. I'd have my money in the business whatever happened. My mother is always good for more. But what do you say ? ”

“ Well,” said Ben, “ I can't say anything very definite. We must wait till another Mr. Barclay Corbet comes along and then we might make some arrangement ; but I think to talk of—of partnership is rather premature.”

“ But you don't hate me ? ” Mr. Harford asked anxiously.

“ I said I didn't,” Ben replied.

“ I wish you could see my mother,” he said. “ She's splendid. But she lives rather a long way off—at Laycock. I suppose you wouldn't come down for a week-end ? It is a delicious place, a little like Bibury, as a matter of fact. All grey too. Would you ? ”

“ I don't see how I could,” said Ben.

“ No,” said Mr. Harford. “ I was afraid not.”

He left her at her door.

She gave him her hand.

“ Good evening, O'Reilly,
You *are* looking glum.”

she sang.

"No wonder," he said, and turned away.

Ben stood at the door long enough to see him stoop down and pat Soul's head.

XXXVIII

ON Ben's desk lay a long envelope addressed to Miss Staveley in an unknown hand. Opening it she found the following fantasy :

THE INTERVIEW

I dreamed that I went to Heaven. I wasn't dead ; I went there on a mission to interview God for a paper.

"He will be quite easy," the editor assured me. "In fact, He will like it ; it will be a new experience. Every one secretly likes being interviewed, no matter what they say to the contrary, and God will like it too. I'm told He's very human."

This was an odd dream for me, because I've never been a journalist ; but if dreams weren't odd we shouldn't remember them.

I knocked at the door and St. Peter opened

it: an old man like a Tintoretto portrait with a halo. It was the first real halo I had ever seen and I looked at it more than at its wearer. It had no visible fastening, but always remained in position, about three inches above the head, not exactly shining but luminous. At night they must be very effective—if there is any night in Heaven. I wish I had asked. I wish now that I had asked heaps of things I didn't ask. Next time I shall make a list; but then there will be no next time.

Of course I don't mean that I should have troubled God about these trifles; I should have found one of the young angels who were everywhere and asked him; or I should have sent for one of my friends who died in the War. . . .

Should I? I wonder if I should have dared. . . .

Meanwhile St. Peter waits. "What do you want?" he asked.

I handed him my card with the name of the paper on it.

"God perhaps would grant me an interview?" I said. "I was sent here for the purpose."

St. Peter looked more than surprised.

"My editor," I said, "seemed confident that I should be admitted."

"Who is your editor?" said St. Peter. "Do we know him here?"

"I should doubt it," I replied.

"Well, I'll see," he said, "but it's all very unusual and irregular. You'd better tell your leonid to wait."

He carefully locked the door again, with me just inside it, and shuffled away. He was clearly irritated.

After a while he returned.

"It's very surprising," he said, "but God will see you. He seemed quite pleased about it. I don't know what Heaven's coming to. Personally, I'm against every kind of publicity. The emphasis laid by a fellow-disciple on one or two unfortunate moments in my own life has been a source of grief to me ever since. This way, please, and remember that the interview is permitted only on condition that no leading questions are asked. Nothing as to the reason for the creation or anything like that, for example. A quiet talk merely; no excitement."

How I came into the Presence I cannot

remember ; but suddenly I was with God, just ourselves. Nor did I feel frightened.

But St. Peter's warning about leading questions made it difficult for me. Of course those were what I wanted to ask, and I remember thinking how annoyed my editor would be that I had paid any attention to a doorkeeper. The whole business of interviewers is to be superior to doorkeepers. But then I am not a journalist ; I have quite a lot of sensitiveness ; and I could not bring myself to disregard the old saint, who, after all, was only acting on instructions. It would be terrible to be allowed into Heaven and then behave in a vulgar way.

After racking my brains for a start I asked God if there was anything that was interesting Him in particular just at the moment.

He smiled.

"As it happens," He said, "there is. Only this morning I was looking down over London, and almost for the first time I noticed something that gave me great pleasure. Pathetic too, in a way ; but then there is so much pathos——

"I noticed all the little gardens. I don't mean the gardens where there are gardeners ;

I mean the tiny square yards among the stones and squalor, with flowers and shrubs that literally fight for life and would never live at all if they were not lovingly tended. Sometimes there is a rockery, sometimes an attempt at a pool, and then the window-boxes—they give Me pleasure too, much more than Corporation ornamental bedding ever could. Some of these little gardens," He said, "and the gallant struggle they make to bring beauty into ugly places, call tears to the eyes"; and I believe He meant it, for I watched Him. "The poor souls," He murmured, "the poor, brave souls."

"You mentioned Corporation carpet-bedding just now, Sir," I said. "You must have noticed that English gardens are infinitely more reckless and joyful than they used to be? Of course, I don't know what flowers were like, Sir, when You began, but every year sees new varieties come into being—more lovely delphiniums, more ethereal columbines, more glorious tulips, more delicate daffodils, and every year more people lavish themselves on herbaceous borders and wild gardens."

"I have certainly noticed it," said God, "and it has given Me immense satisfaction."

I know who is chiefly responsible for it too," He added, "and her name is very highly honoured here."

And then I woke up.

Here it ended, but at the foot of the page was written : " Dear Miss Staveley, I hope this hasn't bored you. I thought I should like you to know that I now and then have a thought beyond book selling.

" Yours sincerely,

" PATRICK ST. QUENTIN "

Patrick was in the shop that evening when Ben left.

He said nothing, but looked expectant.

" Good night, Mr. St. Quentin," said Ben, holding out her hand. " But really I ought to be cross with you because you made me neglect my work for over an hour."

Patrick glowed.

" You have given me a totally new God," she said, " and I'm going home to think about Him."

XXXIX

GUY drove straight from the station to Ben's office. Like Cecil, he, too, was bronzed and

hard and the typical soldier with his little trim moustache, but he looked worried.

He embraced her with ardour. "You're very pretty," he said. "I'd forgotten."

"Nonsense," said Ben. "I'm a 'capable woman'; no more and no less."

He held her at arm's length. "You're very attractive," he said. "I can't think why you're not married."

"I've given you one reason," said Ben. "'Capable women' remain free."

"Every woman should be married," said Guy.

"Especially Melanie," said Ben, laughing.

But Guy did not laugh. His face clouded.

"Oh, my hat!" he said. "That's what I came to talk to you about. Before I went home even. By the way, how is the governor?"

"Just the same," said Ben. "His capacity for bearing other people's calamities with fortitude, as somebody said, develops every day."

"And the step?" he asked.

"Oh, she's all right," said Ben; "you'll like her."

"Rolls, too, doesn't she?" Guy inquired.

"Rolls," said Ben.

"Does she let the governor touch it?" asked Guy.

"How little you seem to know of your own father!" said Ben. "And I thought of you as a wise child."

"I may have been once," said Guy, "but that's all over. Oh, the mess I've been getting into!"

"What kind of a mess?" Ben asked anxiously.

"On the boat," said Guy.

"Cards?" she asked.

"No, I wish it was. No, I've—well, the fact is, Ben, my dear, I'm engaged."

"I know that," said Ben. "You've been engaged for years. Don't Melanie and I live together, and don't I see her watching for the postman?"

"Oh, cut that out," said Guy, with a groan. "That's not the engagement I mean. I'm engaged to someone else, someone I met on the boat."

"My dear Guy," said Ben, "this is awful."

"Don't I know it?" said Guy.

"But I mean for Melanie," said Ben.

"For both of us," said Guy.

“ Can’t you break off the new affair ? ” Ben asked.

“ I suppose I could if I wanted to,” said Guy. “ But I don’t. I’m potty about her. The other thing was a ghastly mistake. Surely,” he went on, “ you would rather I discovered the mistake while there was yet time than go on with it and ruin both our lives ? I know it sounds like a novel, but you know what I mean.”

“ Yes,” said Ben, “ I quite agree with that. But I wonder if it hasn’t been too quick for you to be sure about yourself ? You’ve known one girl five years and the other less than five weeks.”

“ That’s true,” said Guy. “ But I don’t think time means much. What about love at first sight ? ”

“ I know,” said Ben. “ But liner love—especially Indian liner love—is supposed to be particularly misleading.”

“ This isn’t,” said Guy firmly. “ This is the goods. I may be impulsive,” he went on, “ but I’m not an ass ; at any rate I’m not a silly ass. I’ve kept my eyes open, and I’ll bet you that for every marriage that has gone wrong after a very short engagement I

can show you two that have gone equally wrong after a long one."

"I think that's exceedingly probable," said Ben, with a sigh. "What I am thinking is not that you are any less likely to be happy with your new girl than with Melanie; I am thinking of Melanie herself and what is to be done about her. What do you mean to do? She's expecting you to-day; looking forward to it. What do you mean to do?"

"Well," said Guy, "that's just it. I was wondering if you would help me, if you would explain."

Ben laughed bitterly. "Me again!" she said. "'Always go to Ben when you're in a mess!' Has the liner girl got any money?" she asked.

"Money! What's money?" said Guy. "Don't be squalid."

"Melanie's two hundred a year might be very useful," said Ben.

"You're too late," said Guy. He pulled at his absurd moustache. "But if you wouldn't mind breaking it to Melanie tactfully, and letting her down gently, you'd be a brick. And I'm sure you could; no one could do it better. And, by Jove! you

advertise to do it too—‘ Domestic Problems.’ Now compared with this one, all other domestic problems are ‘also rans.’ Be a darling, Ben, and smooth things with Melanie. After all, she’s not a child ; she knows that in this kind of matter minds often change.”

“ I know Melanie pretty well,” said Ben, “ and I should guess you’re making a very foolish mistake. She may look bored and take too little trouble to make you her slave, but she’s true as steel and she’s as fond of you as she can be. And another thing, she’s always amusing ; and from what I know of life, a girl who is always amusing is not to be lightly turned down. It isn’t fair to break a long engagement like this, without seeing her again first.”

“ Oh, as to that,” said Guy, “ engagements are being broken every day ; why not ours ? You will help me, won’t you ? ”

Ben stood up. “ No, Guy,” she said, “ I won’t. Not like that, anyway. Usually when people ask me to do things I comply. But not if I don’t believe I ought to. In your case I am certain that you, and you alone, are the person to explain. It would be very

cowardly not to, and you are a soldier and therefore not a coward. You owe it to Melanie to tell her yourself, face to face ; and the sooner you do it, the better. That's my last word."

" I think you're very selfish," said Guy.

" I can't help what you think," said Ben. " That's my last word. She'll be at home after five. I shan't get back till seven or later. And now I must earn my living."

Guy went off like a bear, and Ben spent a wretched day thinking about Melanie's misery and deploring the fickleness of men and Staveleys.

She was therefore the more rejoiced when on reaching Aubrey Walk she heard Melanie singing in her room and found her arraying herself in her best, preparatory to dining with Guy and going to the play.

Ben expressed no surprise.

" How did Guy strike you ? " she asked, after a while.

" At first he seemed awfully gloomy," said Melanie. " He didn't even seem to want to kiss me. But after a little while he got quite like his old self again, only more so, and was

the nicest thing on earth, and he wants the wedding directly. This week if possible, he said ; but of course that's absurd."

At that moment Guy's taxi was heard and he came bounding up the stairs, while Melanie retired to complete her toilet.

He put his fingers on his lips as he met his sister. "Not a word," he said. "It's all right. That other affair was a mistake. Those Indian liners, you know. That proverb about being off with the old love is a very sound one, and almost directly I saw Mel again I knew I didn't want to be on with the new."

"Have you told the new?" Ben asked.

"Not yet," he said. "I was wondering if you——"

Ben drew back. "Not I!" she exclaimed.

Guy burst into roars of triumphant laughter. "You bought it!" he cried, and roared again. "What I was going to say," he went on, "was that I was wondering if you would—post this letter to her. I haven't got a stamp."

Ben threw a cushion at him with masterly accuracy, as Melanie, all radiance and joy, came into the room.

XL

MERRILL, looking very attractive in her weeds, sat in Ben's room, interfering not a little with "The Beck and Call's" machinery. But that, of course, is the principal industry of all widows who call on business people.

"I call it very selfish and horrid of Alicia," she said. "Here she is, about to marry this rich old ironmonger——"

"Ironmaster," Ben corrected.

"Ironmaster, then. It's the same thing," said Merrill. "Here she is, anyway, about to be happy herself and have all her worries about money and about the boys removed for ever, and she has the cheek to say that I oughtn't even to see Roland—that's Captain Andrews, you know—for another three months. What do you think of that?"

"Well," said Ben, "I disagree. I think you should do exactly as you want to."

"And marry at once?"

"Certainly, if you want to. It's nobody's affair but yours and his. You are definitely engaged, aren't you?"

"Of course," said Merrill.

"And there's nothing to prevent you marrying except the possibility of public opinion disapproving?"

"No," said Merrill, "but people are very horrid."

"You mustn't mind people," said Ben. "Surely you know that? If we mind people life isn't worth living. The only thing to consider is your happiness. If you had been happy with Egbert you would not want to marry again so soon, or possibly not at all; but as you weren't happy with him I don't see any reason for you to wait."

"The whole question of time is absurd," said Merrill. "Who is it that fixes the interval? Why should a year be all right and eleven months all wrong? It is ridiculous—with life galloping on in the monstrous way it does."

"Well," said Ben, with a despairing glance at the letters waiting to be attended to, "the remedy is yours. Defy public opinion, and marry next week. Go and be registered; get a special licence; anything. But do it."

"I was wondering," said Merrill, "whether

we might not marry now secretly and go abroad, and then come back and announce it. That would kill two birds with one stone : we should be married at once, and all those horrid cats, including darling Alicia, would be silenced."

" You never silence horrid cats," said Ben. " And I'm against anything secret. And I don't suppose Captain Andrews would care about it either."

" I think he would do as I wish," said Merrill, with a confident smile.

Only if he liked the wish himself, thought Ben, remembering the quiet decisiveness of the plus-four warrior ; but all she said was that it was a pity that Merrill was such a coward.

" A coward ! " exclaimed the widow. " How can you ? You are as bad as Alicia. And you have been a great disappointment to me, too. I always thought of you as being so kind and comforting, and all you do is to look absent-minded and call me a coward."

" My dear," said Ben, " I have encouraged you in every possible way. I have even urged you to marry at once, which is what you say you want to do."

"I don't know that I do want it," said Merrill. "I don't want to do anything that would be unfair to Roland. I don't mind about myself, even though you think I do, but I should never forgive myself if through marrying too soon Roland lost anyone's respect. I am going now," she said sadly. "I am sorry to have troubled you."

"Good-bye, darling," said Ben. "You have never looked prettier. If you want someone really sympathetic to talk to, step in the shop downstairs and ask Mr. Harford to recommend you a good book. He's the one in tweeds."

"I was thinking of doing so," said Merrill. "I noticed him as I came in. Good-bye; I hope you'll be nicer next time."

"Good-bye, darling," said Ben. "You have never looked prettier. I think Roland the most enviable of men."

"Cat!" said Merrill, returning suddenly and flinging her arms round Ben's neck. "No, not cat—sweetest of hearts! But oh, I'm so miserable!"

She cried luxuriously for a minute and then jumped up smiling.

"I shall let Roland decide," she said.

XLI

"THIS is rather a blow, your brother coming back," said Tubby Toller, looking round Ben's office with a critical eye. "It's done our little circle in. Why, he wants to be married in five minutes. Highly suspicious, I call it."

"What do you mean—suspicious?" Ben asked.

"When a fellow who's been engaged for years clamours suddenly to marry, all in a moment, it suggests that he's in danger, has lost his nerve, wants to be pulled into safety," said Tubby. "I rather fancy Master Guy has been singeing his wings."

"Oh, Tubby! how cynical you are!" said Ben. "What will you be like when you're fifty?"

"At fifty," said Tubby, "I shall be a child again. I notice a strong tendency in middle-aged men to become childish. But aren't I right about your brother?"

"You must ask someone else," said Ben.

"And I'll tell you something more," said Tubby. "When you're married and your husband suddenly begins to give you pearl

necklaces and diamond rings, look out. They're more likely to be from the guilty conscience than the loving heart."

"Oh, Tubby, shut up!" said Ben. "You're insufferable. But what is it you want? You didn't come here merely to be destructively clever, I'm sure."

"I came to look round," said Tubby. "After all, a parent may inspect his young, mayn't he? And I consider 'The Beck and Call' largely my own child. How is it doing?"

"Not so badly," said Ben. "I've just carried out an American commission that netted quite a lot."

"Thank God for America!" said Tubby. "As Canning said, or meant to, 'The New World was called in very largely to redress the bank balances of the Old.' Could you get me a lady-cook?"

"What for?" Ben asked.

"To be a lady and to cook, of course," he said.

"How many in family?" Ben asked.

"Just the three of us," he said.

"Three? Who is the other?" Ben asked.

"Myself—1," he replied; "the lady—2; the cook—3."

"No, I couldn't," said Ben. "I couldn't lend myself to such a *ménage*."

"But it would be all right," said Tubby. "The cook would act as chaperon when I was talking with the lady ; and the lady would be on the watch when I was visiting the kitchen. I want a lady-cook. I feel I should be a better man if I had the constant society of a lady-cook—or a cook-lady, I don't mind which."

"No," said Ben firmly.

"Then will you get me a valet-governess ?" Tubby asked. "I have a passion for hyphenated assistance."

"You haven't got any children," said Ben.

"No, but I have clothes," said Tubby. "And I'll hire a child. Anything to persuade a valet-governess to stay."

"Tubby, you're wasting my time," said Ben. "Go back to the Treasury or wherever it is you sleep."

"Listen to her!—" Tubby invoked the ceiling. "She advertises herself as 'The Beck and Call' and she turns away business ! She is rude to clients ! I came here with money in my purse to try and do you a good turn, and you spurn me. Now, my

dear Ben, be serious. Will you get me a chauffeur-billiard-marker ? ”

“ No ! ” said Ben, lifting up a paper-weight, as Tubby made for the door.

He did not, however, go ; but three minutes later reappeared.

“ I’ve been talking to the sportsman outside,” he said. “ A clever child. I have asked him to come to me as a butler-secretary and he seems keen. Do you mind ? ”

“ If you rob me of Dolly,” said Ben, “ I’ll never speak to you again.”

“ I must do something,” said Tubby. “ It would be a very serious thing for you if I went about London telling everybody that I had been to ‘ The Beck and Call ’ with quite a number of needs and not one could you satisfy. Grant me one request anyway. Grant me ! ”

“ What is it ? ” said Ben.

“ Give me leave to read a novel by Erckmann-Chatrian.”

And this time he went.

XLII

SHE was a plump and kindly lady of a little more than middle age, with evidences of

wealth about her and a handkerchief ready for service.

"You don't know me," she said to Ben, "but I know you, or rather all about you. In a kind of way we're relations."

Ben expressed her surprise.

"If there is such a thing as a step-aunt," said the lady. "I'm one. I'm Belle's sister."

"Oh!" said Ben. "Mrs. Vicat?"

Her visitor admitted it.

"Of course," said Ben, sympathetically. "I've heard about you. Your son died quite recently. I'm so sorry."

The handkerchief came into play.

"Yes," said Mrs. Vicat. "He never had a chance, he was so badly wounded. But he lingered on and on and was always so brave. And now he's gone. It's because I want to do something in memory of him that I'm here. My sister told me to come to you. 'Go to "The Beck and Call,"' she said, 'and talk to my stepdaughter. She's very clever and quick at thinking of things. But of course you must pay,' she said.

"As if I should take advantage of being connected with the family!" Mrs. Vicat added indignantly. "So you must charge me

for all the time you give me, my dear, whether anything comes of it or not."

"We'll see," said Ben. "What kind of a memorial were you thinking of?"

"Well," said Mrs. Vicat. "At first I was thinking of an obelisk or a cross, or something like that. You know the kind of thing. There's one in Sloane Square. But somehow I've rather changed my mind. There are so many of those, all over the country, and I'm wondering if it's quite right to put up another just to one officer.

"And of course," she continued, "there will be a monument in the church: that's all arranged for. I've got a nice architect—one that will let me have my own way a little, I'm assured; not one of those masterful quarrelsome ones. Architects can be very trying, my dear. You should see our house—all the living rooms and the bedrooms on the north, and the passages and the kitchen and larder on the south! Everything sacrificed to the entrance! My poor dear husband argued with him night and day, but he was too much for us. But that's neither here nor there. The monument is all arranged; it's the memorial I'm worrying

about now, and Belle told me to come to you."

"How much do you want to spend?" Ben asked.

"I don't mind," said Mrs. Vicat forlornly. "It's the only interest in life I have left."

"Had your son any particular hobbies?" Ben asked. "Did he support any particular kind of charity?"

"I can't say that he did," said Mrs. Vicat. "He had a wonderful collection of postage stamps. But that doesn't help much."

"No," said Ben, puckering her brow. "And yet," she continued, "you would like it to be useful?"

"Yes, I want it to be really helpful," said Mrs. Vicat. "I want my son's name to be associated with something that would benefit people. I saw a very pretty drinking-fountain the other day, which was also a War Memorial."

"But you could afford something bigger than that?" Ben suggested.

"Oh, yes, money is no object. The cenotaph is very beautiful."

"Very," said Ben. "But that has a distinct purpose and you wouldn't wish to duplicate it."

"On the top of a hill," said Mrs. Vicat. "There's a beautiful high hill near us. Another cenotaph there would be most impressive."

"But isn't a cenotaph a monument to someone whose real burial place is somewhere else or isn't known?" Ben asked.

"Is it?" said Mrs. Vicat. "I didn't know. I thought it meant a War Memorial simply."

"Since you have come to me for advice," said Ben, "I must say what I feel about this, and that is that in memory and honour of your son you ought to do something of real practical help for his fellow-soldiers in distress. There are many incurables among them, and you could, for example, build and endow a home—say at the seaside—for them—to be comfortable in. That's an idea that occurs to me as I am talking."

"I should like that," said Mrs. Vicat. "That's a very nice idea. Belle said you were clever. And of course at the seaside, because then I could go down and visit it. I'm very fond of the sea. Do you know Littlehampton? I've been very happy there in that terrace overlooking the green where

the children ride on donkeys. We took a house there one summer and stayed on through the winter. So mild. A seaside home at Littlehampton is a charming notion."

"If you would give me a little time to think and perhaps discuss the matter with others," said Ben, "I am sure I could put some more ideas before you. I should like to; it's the kind of task that would give me great pleasure to carry out. Will you come to-morrow at three?"

And Mrs. Vicat agreed, and, dabbing afresh at her eyes, made her way to her very luxurious limousine.

"Your employer is very clever," were her last words to Dolly, who helped her downstairs, as she gave him a shilling. On this, being a superstitious London boy, he was mindful, as soon as the car had moved on, to spit.

XLIII

AT dinner that evening, Melanie was sounded as to the memorial, but Melanie had her own affairs in hand. When a girl is within a few days of her marriage, she can't concentrate

on outside questions such as this, no matter how humane she may be.

She was an odd girl, with no romance showing, whatever there might be underneath. Her eyes were incapable of surprise ; her mind of wonder. It is a great loss, and too many girls seem to be suffering from it. In speech she was candid ; in hearing, careless ; very particular that you should not misunderstand her, but not in the least worried by the chance of misunderstanding you—often, indeed, not listening to replies at all.

These are not qualities that on the face of them make for the happiest unions, but along with them Melanie had a great sense of duty, and one never knows how a girl may develop after marriage. Men and husbands are not so widely different ; but girls and brides can be divided by such a gulf as to be almost strangers. A girl passing under her lover's glamour can emerge a changed being.

“ We had a bit of a shindy to-day, Guy and I,” said Melanie. “ Over the ring. He wants me to have a wedding ring and I refused. I can't bear the things. They make me shudder. It's bad enough to go to

church with him and endure that disgusting service, without being branded for ever more with a gold band. It's only one remove from the ring in a bull's nose. I'm no more Guy's wife because I've got it than I should be without it. If I agree to marry him, I marry him. A very unbecoming piece of metal on my hand can't make the difference, not to a decent woman."

"It was a new idea to Guy, I expect," said Ben.

"Absolutely," said Melanie. "He seemed thunderstruck."

"He's not so advanced as you," said Ben. "And I expect he was perplexed, because you don't mind wearing an engagement ring."

"That's different," said Melanie. "It's beautiful. There's some reason for that. But even that I don't wear on the ordinary finger. Why should all the world know I'm engaged? Guy doesn't wear a ring to advertise the fact; why should I?"

"He probably would if you asked him," said Ben. "And he'd wear a wedding ring too. He'd be proud to."

"Don't you think I'm right?" Melanie asked.

"No, I don't," said Ben. "Apart altogether from the fact that Guy is my brother, I don't think it's fair to either of you. Take your honeymoon, for example. I don't know where you're going, but probably to some hotel. The first thing the people at the desk look at is your left hand, and if there's no wedding ring on it your character has gone completely, and Guy's is not what it might be."

"But who cares what anyone else thinks?" Melanie asked.

"All of us," said Ben, "in one way or another. But this is a case where both of you ought to agree. If Guy took your attitude about wedding rings, I shouldn't have a word to say; but as he objects, I think you ought to give way."

"Confound your cold common sense," said Melanie. "I will think about it. But this public flaunting of one's bondage is hateful."

"You may not think it bondage later on," said Ben. "If you don't, you're all right. If you're going to for ever, I wish you'd break the whole thing off at this moment."

Melanie left her chair, and, going over to Ben, gave her a light kiss on her hair.

"Don't worry," she said.

It was more reassuring than any other woman's oath on the Good Book.

After dinner Ben carried the problem to Uncle Paul, whom she found looking utterly miserable.

"My dear!" said Ben. "You're not ill, are you? You frighten me."

"No," said Uncle Paul weakly. "I'm not bodily ill. But life is a blank—they're cleaning out the Round Pond."

Ben put the matter before him.

"As step-aunt," she said, "doesn't mind what she spends, isn't this a gorgeous opportunity to do something really worth doing? And she's so absurdly amenable, ready to take advice. Just like putty. There never was such a chance to be really useful.

"So many things," she continued, "begin well and then decline. Village reading-rooms, with stone tablets in the wall saying in whose honour they were built, are opened with a great flourish, and the next time you go there they are closed and the windows broken. Clubs and institutes the same. But we can provide against all that. It mustn't be enough just to build; there must be endowment, and responsible caretakers or managers, for whatever we do.

“ I suppose,” she continued, “ as a matter of fact, country people don’t want village institutes; they want the village pump. That’s where they really enjoy meeting and talking.”

“ Some friends of mine,” said Uncle Paul, “ made a beautiful garden in their village, as a memorial. A lawn in the midst for the children to play on, and seats and shelters all round for the old people. And flowers. All properly looked after. That was a really good idea.”

“ I like that,” said Ben. “ But there might be something more costly too. I shall go on thinking. And I’ll ask Mr. St. Quentin.”

XLIV

THE next morning when Ben entered “ The Booklovers’ Rest ” it appeared to be empty. Not a sign even of Ernie Bent, who usually had to be removed from the doorstep, which he was scrubbing, to let her pass.

“ And then from the depths came the wistful words :

Bring back, bring back,
Bring back my Bonnie to me, to me !

and Patrick hobbled out.

"I didn't know it was you," he said, and flushed.

"I wanted to try your pet divination scheme again," said Ben. "May I?"

"Of course," said Patrick.

"I will just fumble for a book," said Ben.

She closed her eyes, approached the shelves and took down a volume. Then she opened it, read a few words, and smiled.

"Was it all right?" Patrick asked.

"I think so," she said, and was about to run up the stairs, but stopped. "Oh, by the way, Mr. St. Quentin," she said, "I've got a client coming to-day to talk about a memorial to her son: something philanthropic and costly. If I were to ask you to come up and join us, could you—would you?"

"With the greatest pleasure," said Patrick, "especially as there's a catalogue due and I ought to be at work on it. But neglecting work is so agreeable."

"Soon after three," said Ben, and ascended to her own domain.

When there, however, she received a shock, for instead of the ordinary placid and competent Jan, was a nervous unhappy Jan, saying that she had been to see the doctor

on the evening before and he had ordered her to stop work instantly and go to Bournemouth or Torquay.

"Of course I shall do nothing of the kind until I can find you someone else," she said, "but I know I'm not well. I've been feeling weak for a long while now and I have horrible nights."

"I'm very sorry," said Ben. "It's a good deal my fault too, for allowing you to go on having no proper lunch and getting no mid-day break. I blame myself seriously, but you know, Jan, you were very obstinate. What does the doctor say it is?"

"He's afraid I may go into a decline," said Jan, "unless I have good air, and do nothing, and drink milk and eat a lot; and—and—I'd much rather be with you."

Mrs. Vicat arrived puffingly to time and again placed her handkerchief within easy range.

"Well, my dear," she said, "what have you decided? I hope it's the Littlehampton home."

"I want you to hear what Mr. St. Quentin, one of the owners of the book shop downstairs, has to say," said Ben.

She rang the bell for Dolly and asked him to invite Mr. St. Quentin to step up.

"This is Mrs. Vicat," said Ben, and she prepared the ground. "Have you any ideas?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," said Patrick. "I have been thinking of nothing else all the morning, and I believe I have the answer. May I say how it strikes me; and you will forgive me if I am too long?"

"I've been thinking," he said, "of the men blinded in the war. They have always been on my mind, but I've never had a chance to help. Losing limbs is a disaster of a totally different kind; it's a bore, of course, to have a wooden leg, and be unable to join in sports any more, and so on; but it's nothing to squeal about. Whereas losing sight—that's terrible.

"I should doubt if any quarrel between nations is worth such a price as one blinded man.

"Sight is too glorious a possession. I have been shutting my eyes at intervals all the morning and realizing what it must be like never to open them again.

"'Never'—that is the appalling word.

"I don't mean only what every one who cares anything for the beauty of nature

would miss—the first primrose, the new moon, a starry night, a yacht race, snow on the trees. Those are the obvious things and probably many a soldier had thought little enough about them. But put yourself in the position of a blinded soldier and think of his loss. The pretty girls, for example. That must be a loss indeed—the faces and figures of the pretty girls. You know how soldiers in their shirt-sleeves lean on the sills of barrack windows and compare notes on the girls who pass? Not too edifying perhaps, but think of the poor devils who can do this no more.

“And games—never to see another football match, another cricket match. I have seen blind men led into Lord’s and watched their poor baulked faces as the sound of the bat against the ball is heard and the crowd cheers a boundary hit. They like to be there—they have the sense of still being in it; they can’t bear not to participate in life—but the loss!

“I have seen them in theatres and music halls too, often; and there the spoken word still has its message; but oh, their baffled look when the laughter depends upon gesture!

“And then think of what blindness must mean to those who have loved pictures. The sense of touch, intensely developed, may reveal much, and certainly the beauty of shape, but it can convey no idea of colour. Finger tips passing over the surface of a Corot learn nothing of its beauty; the National Gallery for ever more is blotted out.”

Patrick paused and blushed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to become rhetorical. But it’s too sad and I was carried away.”

Mrs. Vicat, who had been quietly weeping for some time, implored him to go on.

“Everything you say is so right,” she assured him. “And what do you propose?”

“I haven’t any very useful suggestions,” Patrick said, “but the endowment of new Braille presses might be considered. Many of the men, however, cannot be very much given to reading. What about broad-casting installations? They are all fond of music. Why shouldn’t there be a grant of a wireless set to all institutions or houses where blinded soldiers are to be found?”

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t like to do for the blinded soldiers,” said Mrs. Vicat, when

he had finished. "And if you can arrange the Braille presses and the broadcasting too, I'll gladly pay what is necessary; but I had"—she almost whimpered—"set my heart on a seaside home, and I don't see that for the blind that is needed. What they want, as I understand it, is to be kept employed, beguiled; their minds and hands are to be continuously occupied so that they mayn't brood and mope. Isn't that it?"

"Yes," said Patrick. "That's a very great part of it. That's certainly the kindest thing we can do—to find them absorbing occupations and to make life a pleasure, if not actually an excitement, still."

"When I came in," said Mrs. Vicat to Ben, "I fancied that girl at the desk outside was crying. Is she unhappy?"

"Poor Jan!" said Ben. "Yes, she's just had a great shock. The doctor has told her that she must stop work and retire to some southern place, or she is in danger of going into a decline. She's miserable about it—partly for herself but a great deal for me, because she doesn't like to leave me in the lurch, she says."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Vicat, with sudden cheeriness, "now I've got it!"

She beamed on them with radiant triumph.

“What?” exclaimed Ben.

“The seaside home,” she said. “We’ll have the seaside home after all. Not for blinded soldiers—they shall be dealt with all right, Mr. St. Quentin, never fear!—but for poor working girls who need change and rest from London and can’t afford it. Oh, how happy I am! I did so want that seaside home and now I’ve got it. Your poor girl can’t go there this time because it won’t be ready; but will you see about it at once, my dear? I leave the whole thing to you. You can build a new house or you can take an old house and adapt it. I’ll have all the papers made out by my lawyer at once. And we’ll call it the ‘Adrian Vicat Seaside Home.’ Will you do it?”

“Of course I will,” said Ben.

“And you’ll find out all about the other things?” Mrs. Vicat inquired of Patrick.

“At once,” he said.

“I’m so happy,” exclaimed Mrs. Vicat, again. “Now my mind is perfectly at rest.”

She went away in tearful content and Dolly was summoned to assist her again to the car and to receive the usual guerdon.

“ Thank you,” said Ben to Patrick. “ You were splendid. I think we may call this a truly red-letter day. It’s all most inspiring ; but one thing in particular gives me enormous satisfaction.”

“ And that ? ” Patrick asked.

“ You and I were in absolute agreement.”

“ But you didn’t say a word.”

“ No, there was no need. But when I tried the *Sortes Virgilianæ* this morning what do you think I stumbled on ? Milton.”

“ Well ? ” said Patrick.

“ Well, it opened at ‘ Samson Agonistes ’ ! ”

XLV

“ I SET out intending to pay you just a friendly call,” said Aunt Agatha, “ but coming through the shop downstairs I saw such a lot of books that now I’m going to be a client too. You see they gave me an idea. I’d quite forgotten what a lot of books there are in the world and how little I know of them. But now I think I really must try to know more, so I want you to find me a nice girl to read to me. A girl with a clear

voice, mind. From half-past five to seven, I think. No, there are often callers then. From half-past two till tea. No, that's when I sometimes like a nap. In the morning, then. No, one mustn't be read to in the morning. Well, my dear, let it be after lunch then, and if I fall asleep now and again it doesn't really matter. But she mustn't read what they call bed books."

"I wonder if you really want me to get the girl at all," said Ben.

"Of course I do, dear. It's terrible, it's disgraceful, to think of how little time I have left in which to learn anything of all those books, and I'm sure I couldn't read them to myself. Please get me a nice girl with a refined and distinct voice—so many girls have adenoids, don't you think?—to begin, not next week but the week after next. I'll spend next week in clearing up and getting ready for her.

"I suppose a girl is best," she continued after a moment's thought. "A young man wouldn't do? And yet I see such lots of advertisements in *The Times* Personal Column—how interesting that is and how sad sometimes!—I'm told that all those funny

love letters, as they sound like, are really burglars' codes. Isn't that dreadful? But so every one says. But about this gentleman reader, there are such lots of advertisements from disabled officers wanting employment that perhaps one ought to consider one. I wonder how disabled officers read aloud, dear? Rather strong voices, I'm afraid, after so much drilling. I shouldn't like to be shouted at. Speaking of disabled officers, there's a rather nice lame man in the shop downstairs who showed me the way up. I suppose you've noticed him, dear? I think I must buy something from him on the way out, so as not to disappoint him. I wonder if he's got a Longfellow? I used to love Longfellow when I was a girl. That man getting another to propose for him and the other one being the real one—I haven't read it for years. We might begin with that.

"I hope someone is going to propose to you, my dear," Aunt Agatha went on. "So pretty and clever as you are, and so managing. People tell me this office is wonderfully run. I don't say I want you to marry the lame man downstairs, but I'm sure he's a gentleman, he has such a charming voice,

and he's very good-looking. All but the leg. But legs aren't everything. What's that proverb about helping a lame man over a stile? How well you'd do that?

"I hope I'm not taking up your time, dear," Aunt Agatha continued; "but it's such a long while since you came to see me, and if I'm a nuisance you must make me pay half a crown, or whatever it is you charge for an hour's interview."

"What makes you think Mr. St. Quentin, the lame man downstairs, would make me a good husband?" Ben asked.

"I liked the look of him," said Aunt Agatha. "He looked kind and he's a gentleman. And I don't think it's a bad thing to be a book seller. Anyone may do that now, and he'd bring you home the new novels. Besides, it's a good thing to marry a man who's out of the house all day. I hate to see husbands in to lunch. All wrong. Home lunches are for women. Besides, my dear, there's an epidemic of marrying in the Staveley family and you'll catch it. You can't escape. Look at your father! And then I'm told that Alicia is engaged again to someone at Hove. A widower. I always

said that Hove was too near Brighton. What is the proverb—‘Marry in——’ Oh, no, it’s not Hove, it’s Hastings: ‘Marry in Hastings and repent at leisure.’ How silly of me, but they’re both on the South Coast.

“And poor Merrill, she came to see me the other day. All in black, the rogue, and looking so demure; but if I were one of those bookmakers who advertise in the papers that they never pay, I’d go so far as to bet a pony—it was a pony that your uncle always put on for me on the Derby favourite year after year, but how seldom the favourites win!—I’d bet a pony, whatever it means, that she’s got another man in her eye. I could see him lurking there, the rascal, and not a clergyman this time, I’ll be bound. I taxed her with it, and she said ‘No’ with such a pretty blush that there wasn’t any doubt at all.

“And then there’s Guy come all the way from India to marry your friend. It’s wonderful, I think, that that engagement should have lasted so long, and he in India too, where men fall in love so easily. They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but don’t you believe it, my dear. There’s a better proverb than that which says,

‘Out of sight, out of mind.’ But I can’t admire Guy’s constancy too much; he’s a regular Don Juan; no I don’t mean that—Don Quixote; no, that other man, without fear and without reproach—Bayard. He’s a regular Bayard. Not only to have gone all through his life in India loving her truly, but to have been faithful on the ship too! That’s marvellous. I have the deepest respect for him. Indeed, my dear, I almost rank him with you.

“It shows how susceptible all you Staveleys are, and unless you’re very careful, my dear, you’ll fall too. You ought to be inoculated. Not that inoculation’s any good. I never had such severe colds as after the doctor injected what he called my own culture into my arm. Culture—I didn’t know I’d got any. I thought that was confined to the universities. But sneeze! You should have heard me. Perhaps you did?—I’m only about a mile from Campden Hill. Well, dear, I’m a foolish old woman and I’m sure I’ve talked a lot of rubbish; but I’m very fond of you and you always do me good.

“And now I must be going. I’m so glad to have seen you in your place of business.

And you'll get me a nice girl, won't you? We decided on a girl, didn't we? Yes, I think it must be a girl, because sometimes I should like her to take me to the pictures instead of reading. Reading can be rather tedious. And it would never do for me to go to the pictures with a disabled officer, would it? A nice girl, then. The week after next. Half-past two to four. Without adenoids."

XLVI

BEN was receiving her first visit from her stepmother.

"First of all let me thank you so much for being so kind to my sister," Belle said. "She's not a very decisive person. Perhaps you gathered that?"

Ben admitted it.

"Anyone at all emphatic can do what they like with her," said Belle. "And that's why I'm so glad she's in your hands.

"But that's not what I came about," said the comfortable lady as she sank luxuriously into a chair. "You must forgive me butting

in like this, but I want help badly and only you can give it."

"The cook hasn't left?" Ben asked.

"Oh, no. She seems to be satisfied, if one dare use such a strong word about a cook, or indeed any servant, nowadays. No, it's not the cook, it's your father."

"Yes?" said Ben.

"Well, it's rather a difficult thing to talk about to a daughter—and a stepdaughter too—and one knows what stepmothers are supposed to be—but I'm all at sea about him. He's so different from what I was expecting—from what he promised, in fact. When we were talking about the second marriage he was so thoughtful and considerate of me, so generous, always brought me flowers or some little thing, and you know how fond I am of *marrons glacés*—too fond, the doctor says—and I was very lonely, you know, and I had felt so neglected since Vincent died; and it did really seem as if I was to have someone to pet me again after all. Because Vincent, you know, was the kindest man. There was nothing he wouldn't do to please me; he was always bringing cushions, and arranging for week-ends in nice hotels, and motor trips.

“ Well, so was your father at first ; but this is what is troubling me : Vincent kept it up to the end, but your father has dropped it already. Now, what I want to know, dear, is this : is it just your father’s way or has he got tired of me ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t think he’s got tired of you,” said Ben, earnestly.

“ Was he like that to your mother ? ” Belle asked.

“ He wasn’t very thoughtful of little things, ever,” said Ben. “ But he was fond of her.”

“ Yes,” said Belle. “ But how did he show it ? It isn’t enough for me to be merely in a house with a man ; see him at dinner and watch him reading the paper and, what is much worse, hearing him do it—you have no notion how that rustling gets on one’s nerves, when he turns over ; that isn’t marriage to me. And he is so particular about the food and the service. Was he always like that ? ”

“ He was always rather—well, I might almost say fussy,” Ben admitted.

“ I wouldn’t mind his fussiness if he was fussy over me too,” said Belle. “ But he isn’t. It is all for his own comfort. Of course we’re all selfish, I know. Every one’s selfish. I’m

selfish and I'm lazy. But I do try to play the game, and I don't think he does. And I'm getting frightened." She lowered her voice and drew her chair nearer. "Because, I've got the idea that Vincent knows. I've got the idea that he's looking. I can't say exactly where he's looking from; I can't see him with my mind's eye at all—but I feel that he is looking. Out of some kind of window up there, I suppose; for he was a good man, Vincent was—a dear, good man, kind and open-handed and ready to think the best of every one, even if he did use awful language sometimes and take a little too much wine now and then; but he was so nice in his cups, as they say, not like some people at all: gentle and exaggeratedly polite, even though a little maudlin. In spite of all this, I'm sure he's up there. But it's dreadful thinking that he's looking on and knowing and being sorry for me and"—she sank her voice still lower—"hating your father. Because, my dear, it's going to make me hate him too. There, I've said it."

"Oh, no, Belle!" cried Ben. "You mustn't, you mustn't."

"But I can't help it," said Belle. "It's

coming on, and if it gets worse I shall leave him. There's nothing to stay for now"—she sobbed a little—"but if it got worse it would be a sin to stay on."

While her stepmother had been talking Ben's thoughts had flown to the future and all that the breaking up of her father's present establishment would mean; but only hazily. Directly she was left alone they assumed the clearest of outlines. For if her father were single again what would he do? It was only too evident: he would request his daughter to return. And what would she do? She would have to say yes. She would not have the courage—or possibly even the right—to say no. Horrible to lose all this independence, this amusing work just as it was beginning to pay. But it would be inevitable, because he was her father, and he was getting old, and she would have no real reason to offer against it, being free as she was.

If it had been anyone else's father she would not have liked him at all, she found herself thinking. Ought the accident of parentage to entail such self-sacrificing devotion as it often does? Anyway, it did; and so long as she was free she would probably have to return.

But supposing she was not free! Her heart fluttered.

If she were not free—if she had thrown in her lot with another—her father would have no right . . .

XLVII

It was about half-past ten when the door of "The Beck and Call" office opened and admitted Mr. St. Quentin.

Ben was alone. "Dolly has a day off," she said, "and Miss Marquand is accumulating things for a number of our people, or I would ask you into the back room.

"What is the news?" she asked.

"Oh, I mustn't talk about news," said Pat. "I've come as a client."

Ben laughed. "A client! That's splendid." She became very businesslike. "What can we do for you to-day?"

"It's perhaps rather an odd request," said Pat, "but I was wondering if you could help me to find—well, in point of fact, a wife. For myself, I mean."

Ben reeled for a moment under the suddenness of the shock.

"A wife!" she then exclaimed, blushing a little and fumbling for her notebook. Anything to regain composure!

"Yes," said Pat. "There's nothing so extraordinary about that, is there? Lots of men have wanted wives ever since the world began. In fact, there's a rumour that that is why it has gone on."

"Yes—I know—I've heard," Ben replied. She was recovering her nerve now. "But we don't transact business like that here. You want a matrimonial agency, if there are such things."

"No, I want 'The Beck and Call.' I have the greatest faith in it," said Pat. "I believe it can get me one—if it will."

He looked at her with a smile in his grave eyes until she looked away; but she was smiling too.

"I'm afraid——" she began.

"At any rate," he said briskly, "let me describe my requirements and then perhaps you'll know better. Age, shall we begin with age?"

"If you insist on treating this as a marriage office, yes," said Ben.

"I do," said Pat. "Age, then : twenty-three or four."

"Yes," said Ben.

"But you haven't written it down," said Pat. "This is a serious request. I am honestly asking your help, and I've never been a real client before. First impressions, you know."

"Very well then," said Ben, making the note : "twenty-three or four."

"Height, medium," said Pat. "Hair, dark. Eyes, grey-blue. Have you got all that ?"

"I've taken it down," said Ben.

"Voice, musical," Pat went on. "Laugh, delicious."

Ben looked away as she affected to write.

"Is that essential ?" she asked.

"Absolutely," said Pat. "Must be in business," he went on. "No idle woman need apply. This kind of business would be all right."

"Do you mean she is to continue in business when she is married ?" Ben asked.

"I should leave that to her," said Pat ;
"but I hope so.

"Aren't you rather narrowing it down ? "
Ben asked. "Making it rather difficult for
yourself ? "

"I was trying to make it more easy for
'The Beck and Call,' " he said. "If the
essentials are so explicitly stated, so little
time need be wasted on the search."

"You have been wonderfully explicit,"
said Ben. "But what about yourself ? The
girl—if she is found—will naturally want to
know something about her husband, who at
present, of course, is a stranger to her. What
is she to be told ? "

"That he is utterly unworthy," said Pat ;
"a man of twenty-seven who was knocked
about in the War ; a bit of a dreamer ; a
second-hand book seller with an ambition
to write ; fairly amiable in temper ; fairly
sound in health, but for a slight deficit in
the number of legs normally served out to
men ; and, although, as I said, utterly
unworthy, filled, for a woman of the kind
specified, with worship, admiration, and love.
Do you think you could find a wife for a
fellow like this ? " he asked.

Ben was silent. She stood still with lowered eyes and a heart beating much too fast, but very, very happy.

“Do you?” he asked again.

It was fortunate that no other inquirers arrived at that moment, for they would have found something very like a Universal Aunt in the arms of a second-hand book seller with only one leg.

XLVIII

Mr. Paul Mostyn to Miss Benita Staveley :

“MY DEAREST BEN,

“I have been a very long time in resorting to ‘The Beck and Call’ for assistance; but now I have a real need. Will you go to the best Bond Street jewellers and buy a ring regardless of cost? It is a wedding present for one I am very fond of. Choose it as though it were for yourself.

“I am,

“Your devoted,

“UNCLE PAUL”

XLIX

Mr. Toby Staveley to Miss Benita Staveley :

“ DARLING OLD BEN,

“ What a lark ! I am preparing the
best suite in the place for your honeymoon.
All the best, honey, from your loving brother,

“ TOBY STAVELEY

“ Manager

“ Fairmile Towers County Club, Ltd.”

SEPTEMBER, 1923.

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